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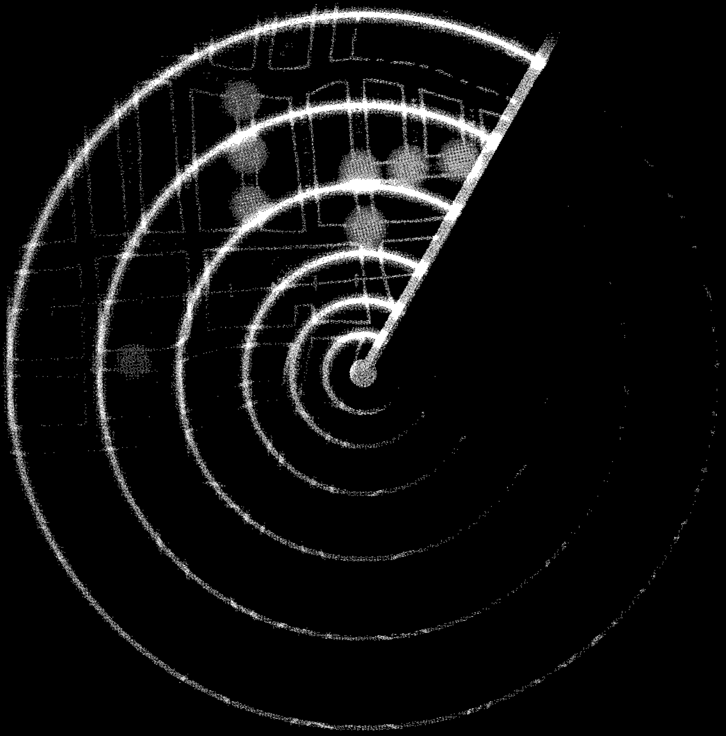

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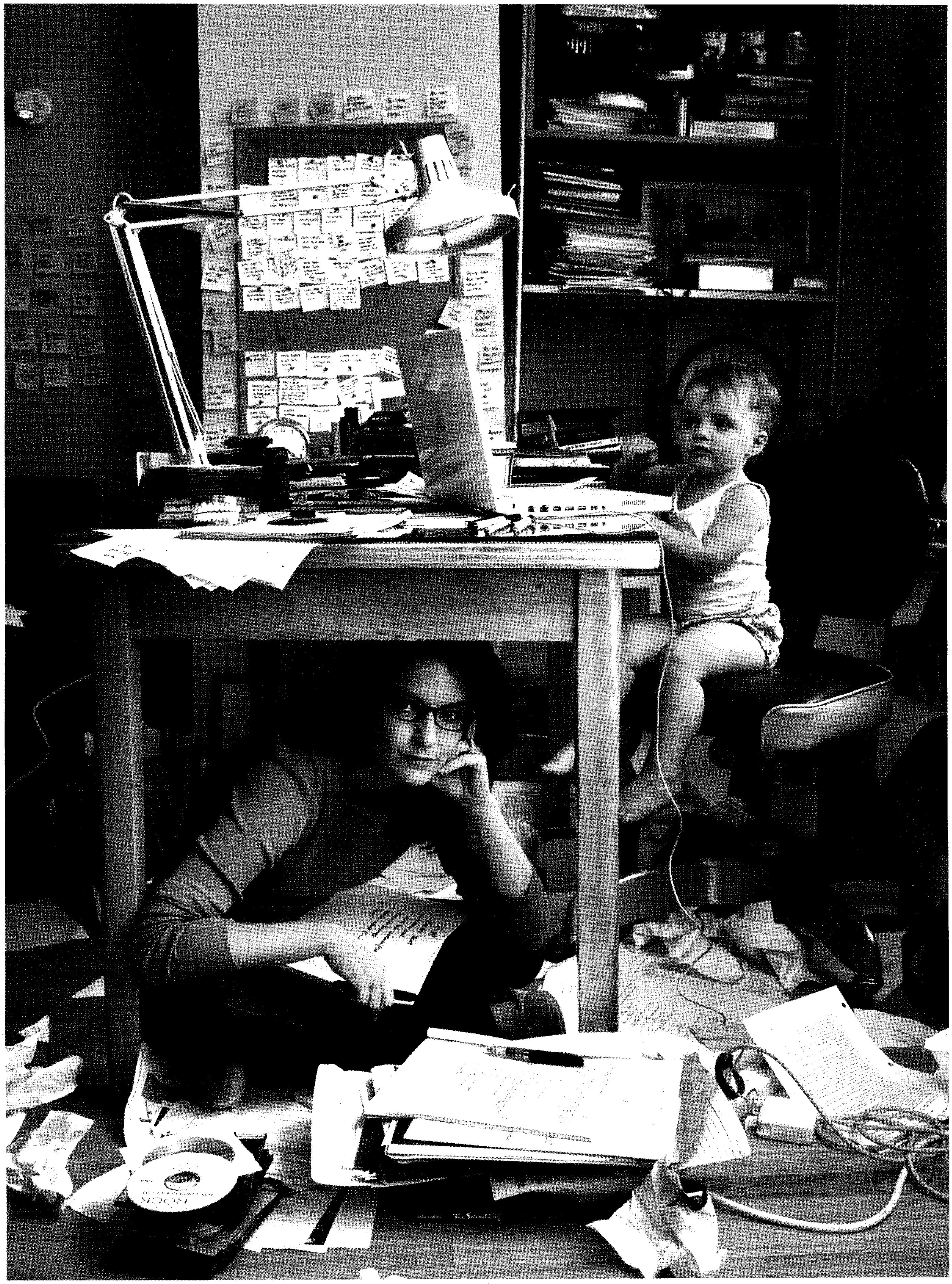

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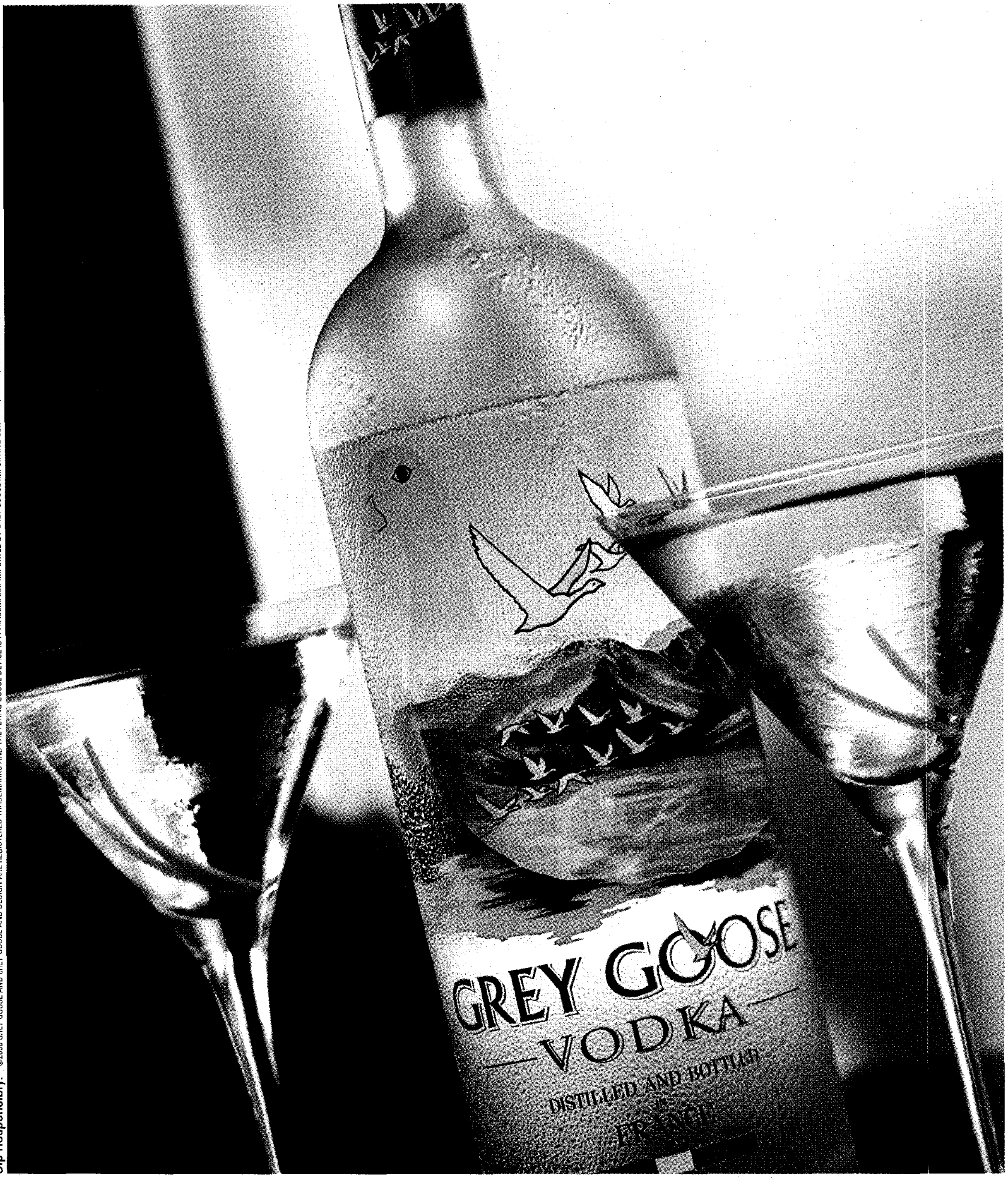

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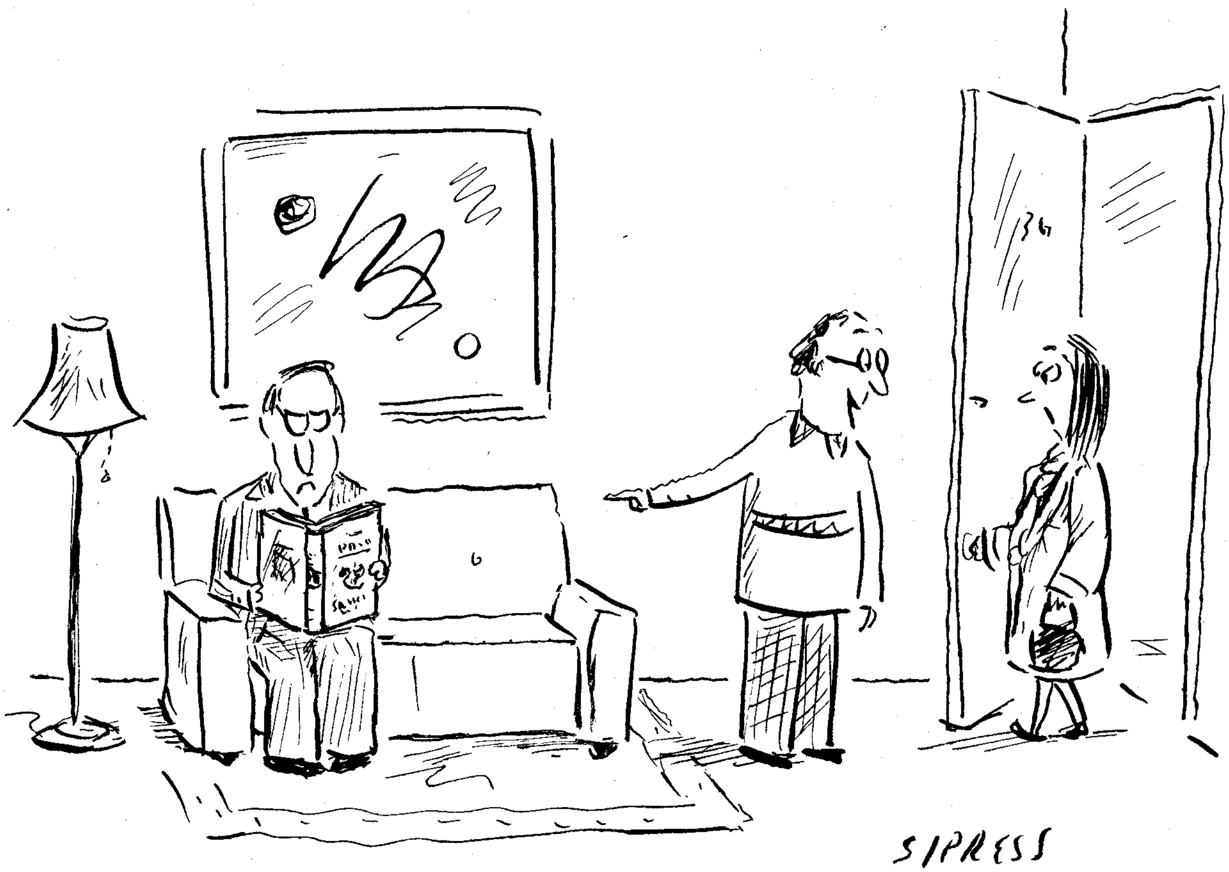
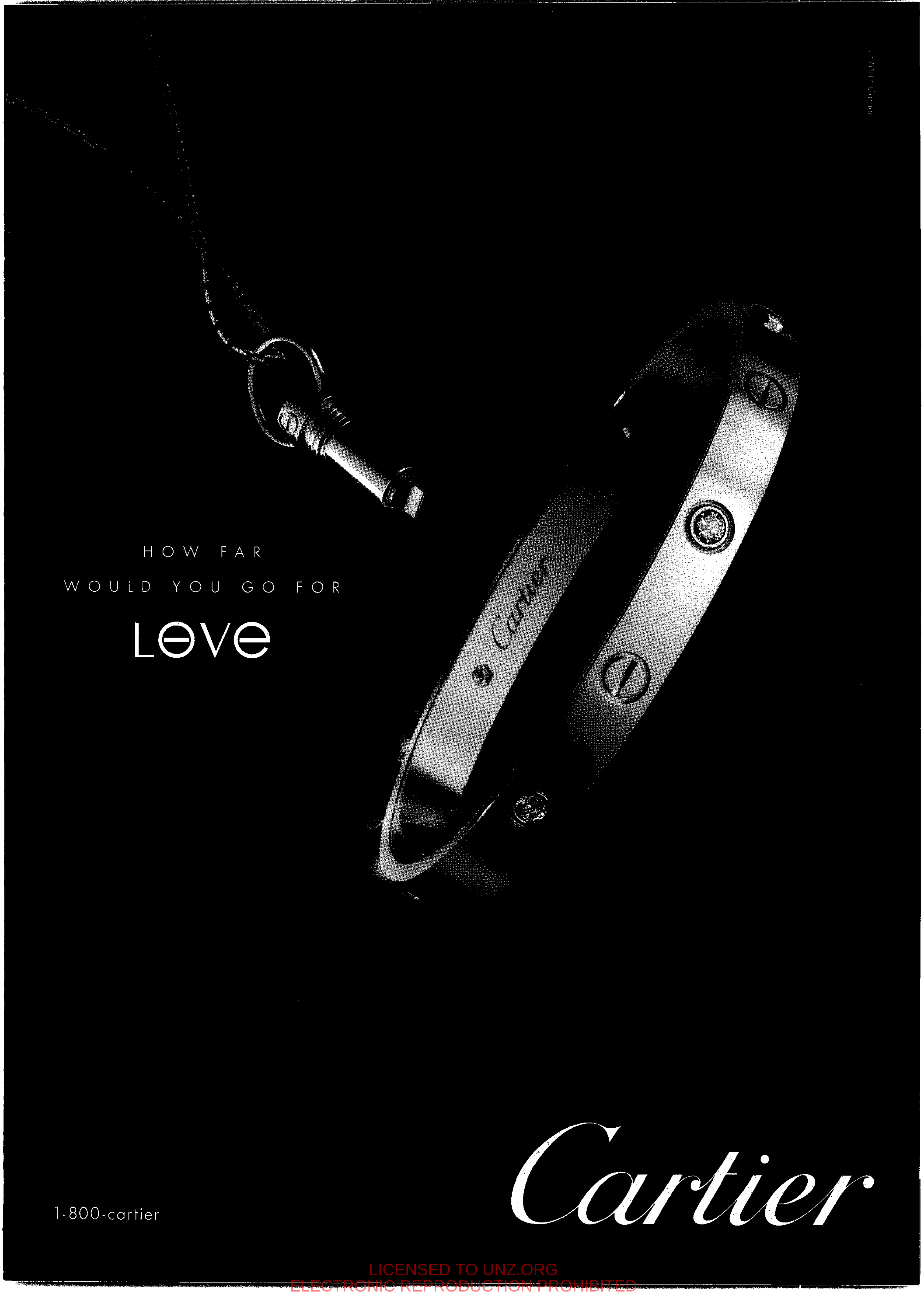
SPOTS *Philippe Petit-Roulet*



"That's the guy I hired to read Proust for me."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Conversations with Woody Allen

His Films,
the Movies,
and Moviemaking

FROM DECADES
OF INTERVIEWS
BY ERIC LAX

"Essential reading"
—L.A.TIMES

"Mesmerizing"
—FINANCIAL TIMES

"Endlessly fascinating"
—BOOKLIST

"Talking to Woody is sublime"
—HUFFINGTON POST

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CONTRIBUTORS

Raymond Carver ("Beginners," p. 100), a short-story writer, poet, and essayist, died in 1988.

Elizabeth Kolbert (Comment, p. 43) writes regularly about the environment. Her book "Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change" is available in paperback.

Junot Díaz ("Alma," p. 52) is the recipient of a fellowship in literature from the American Academy in Rome. His first novel, "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao," was published earlier this year.

John Lahr ("Demolition Man," p. 54), the magazine's senior drama critic, is the author of "Honky Tonk Parade: *New Yorker* Profiles of Show People." He is working on a biography of Tennessee Williams.

Anne Enright ("Natalie," p. 70) was awarded this year's Man Booker Prize for Fiction for her fourth novel, "The Gathering."

Grace Paley (Poems, pp. 84, 116), who died in August, was a writer and poet. Her "Collected Stories" was reissued earlier this year. A new collection of poems,"Fidelity," will be published in March.

Jhumpa Lahiri ("Year's End," p. 112) is the author of "Interpreter of Maladies" and "The Namesake." Her new collection of stories, "Unaccustomed Earth," comes out in April.

James Wood (Books, p. 140), a staff writer, is Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism at Harvard. His new book, "How Fiction Works," will be published next year.

Caleb Crain (A Critic at Large, p. 134) is the author of "American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation." His novella "Sweet Grafton" came out this month in the journal *n+1*.

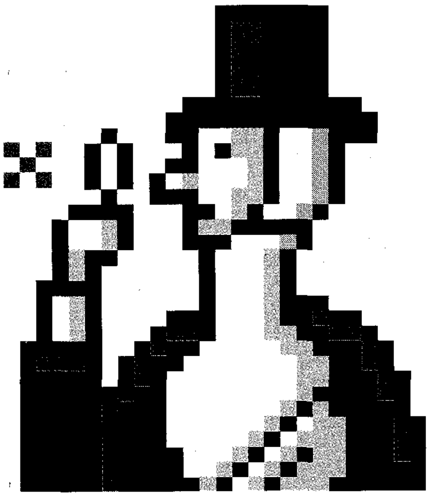
Lore Segal ("The Arbus Factor," p. 78) won the 2007 Clifton Fadiman Medal for her novel "Other People's Houses." Her new collection of stories, "Shakespeare's Kitchen," was published in April.

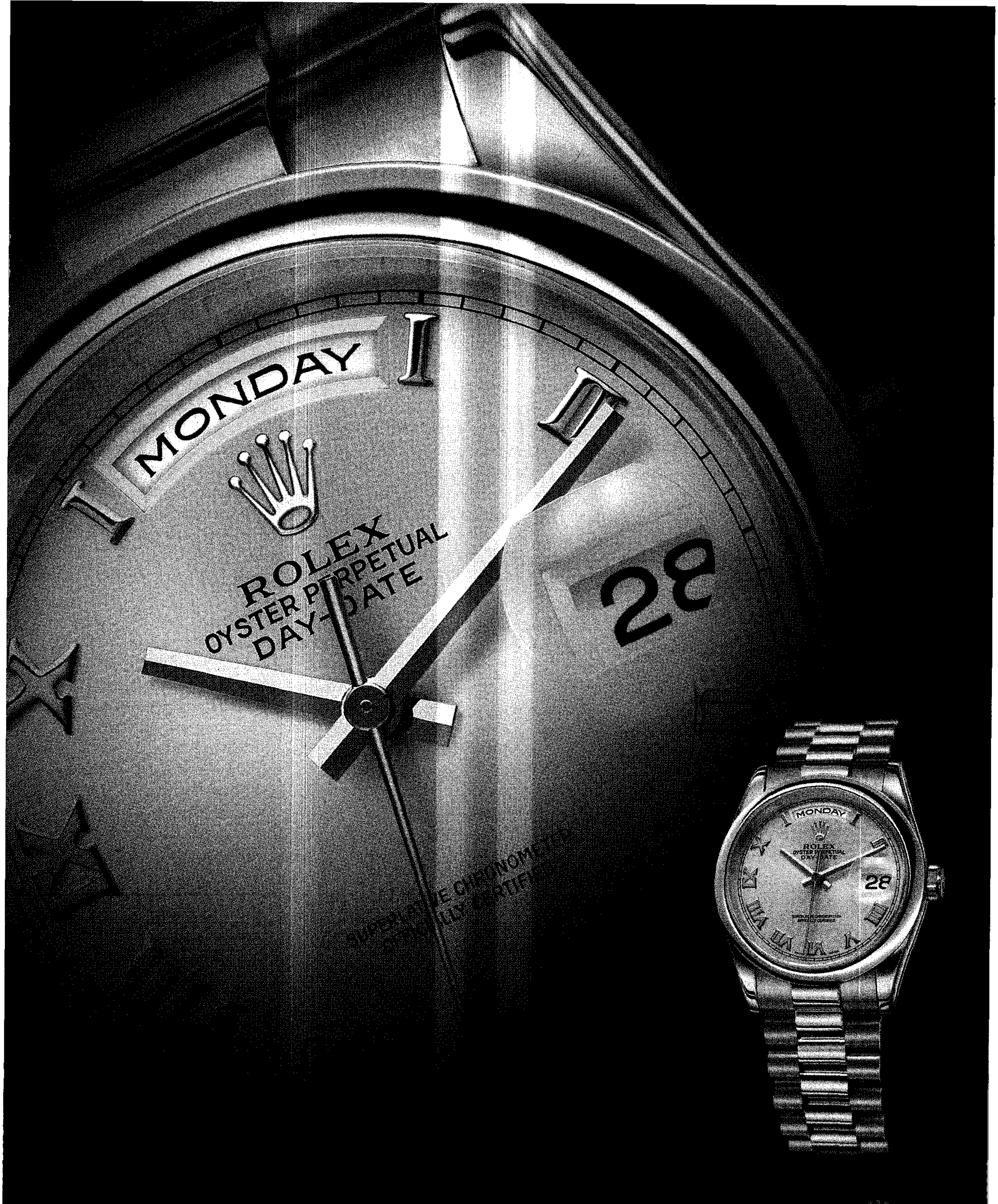
Paul Rudnick ("I Hit Hamlet," p. 82) is a regular contributor of humor pieces. A group of four of his short plays, entitled "The New Century," will be performed at Lincoln Center Theatre in the spring.

Kim DeMarco (Cover) is an artist and designer.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

A line-by-line comparison of *Raymond Carver's* original draft of "Beginners" and Gordon Lish's edit, plus photographs of Carver by *Bob Adelman*. / *Jhumpa Lahiri* reads a short story by William Trevor on the monthly fiction podcast. / *John Lahr* talks about Harold Pinter. / *Ryan Lizza* and *Dorothy Wickenden* discuss the Presidential campaign. / Blogs by *Sasha Frere-Jones* and other staff writers. / From the archives: *Richard Ford* on Carver, *James Thurber* on snapshots, *John Updike* on J. M. Coetzee, and more. / Animated cartoons, the caption contest, and a list of *New Yorker* events.

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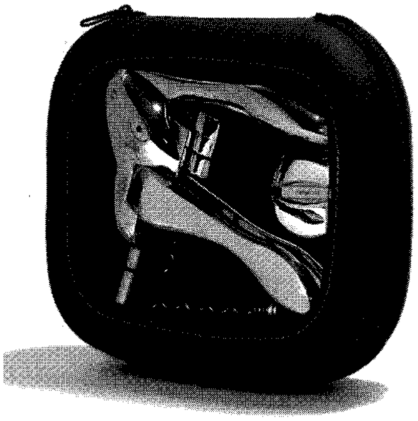

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COMIC LOGIC

Steve Martin, in his memoir of his early career as a standup comedian, writes that he used to get a laugh by claiming that in Bananaland it's true both that all chairs are green and that no chairs are green ("In the Bird Cage," October 29th). "I loved implying that the one thing I believed in was a contradiction," he writes. Actually, those claims are not contradictory: if there are no chairs, both claims are true. (The negation of "All chairs are green" is, rather, "There is at least one chair that is not green.") I would like to think that his audience included some logicians who cracked up at the thought of a chairless Bananaland.

Alexander George
Professor of Philosophy
Amherst College
Amherst, Mass.

H.I.V. IN AFRICA

Michael Specter, in his piece on the role of viruses in human evolution, refers to an essay that I published called "Can Viruses Make Us Human?" ("Darwin's Surprise," December 3rd). I would like to clarify that reference. Although Specter accurately conveys my views on the over-all role of viruses in the evolution of life (including human life), I do not believe that the current H.I.V. epidemic in Africa is expected to cause a selective sweep of this human population. In a hypothetical scenario concerning what H.I.V. might have done earlier in human history, had it been introduced prior to modern medicine and culture, the outcome—that most of the population would succumb to the disease—would be possible only in the absence of social or technological intervention.

Luis P. Villarreal
Director, Center for Virus Research
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, Calif.

POETIC INTERPRETATION

Dan Chiasson, in writing on Mark Strand's poem "Keeping Things Whole," describes the poem as "an existential anti-anthem . . . powerful but dated," and thinks it is "better read as a poem about the helplessness of being a child" (Books, November 19th). The central image in the poem, of absence as a presence ("In a field/I am the absence/of field"), is one of negative space, and it comes directly from the paintings that Strand made before he became a poet. Biographical criticism often trivializes a poem by ignoring its larger philosophical questions and reducing it to simplistic emotions. That Strand chooses to omit biographical details should tell readers that he wants the focus on other, larger issues, and that the poems are driven by powerful, complex emotions that have more than one source.

Sharon Bryan
Salt Lake City, Utah

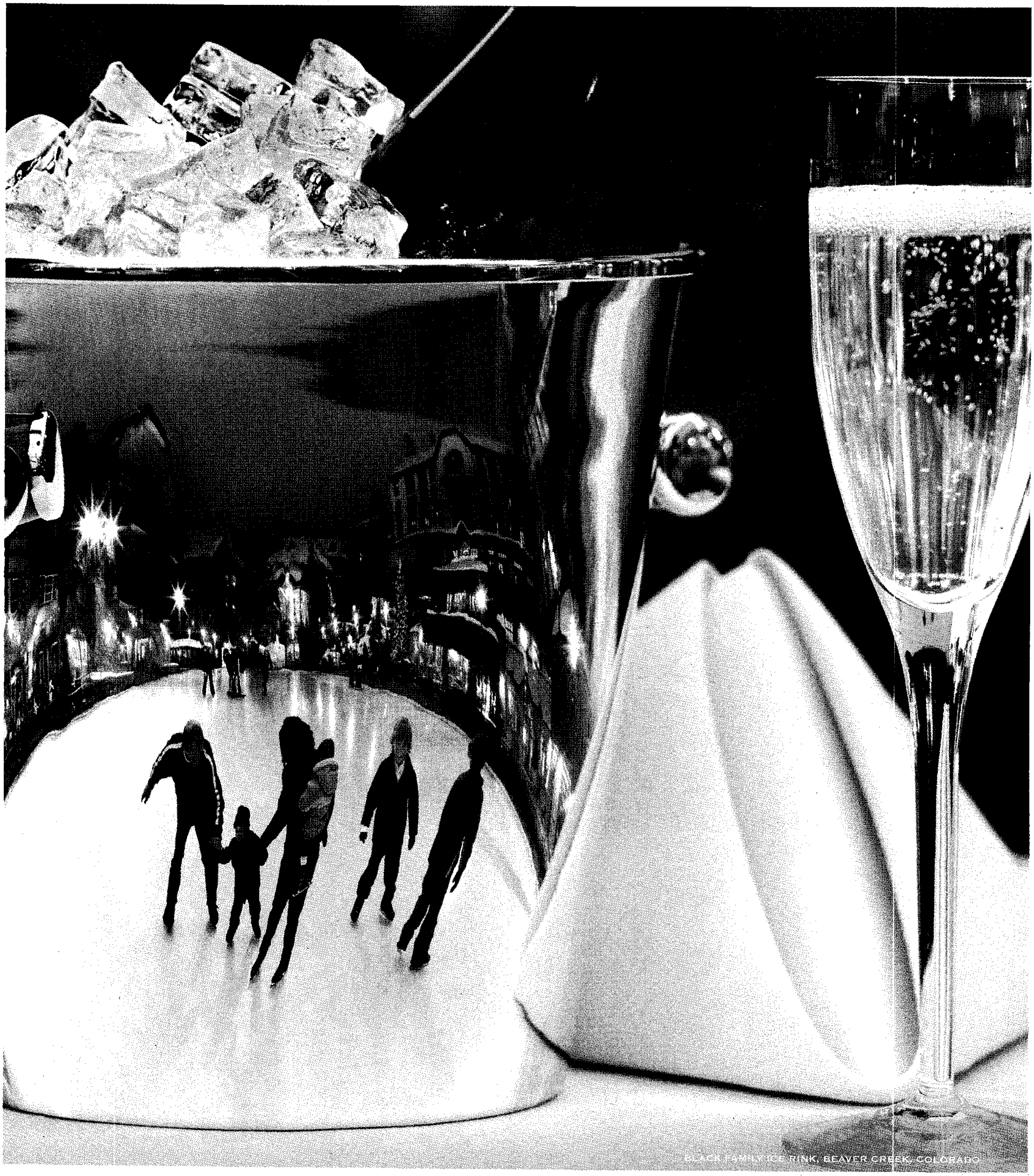
Chiasson's review of Robert Hass's new book of poems, "Time and Materials," characterizes Hass as primarily an autobiographical poet whose work consists of "small dinner parties and hikes" or "a recipe for onion soup," the "remembered pleasure" of a writer for whom "mortality is the new distraction." Yet Hass undercuts these pleasures by situating the lyric within a larger history of violence, suffering, and collective indifference. In eliding the political and historical contexts of Hass's work, Chiasson replicates the very "American amnesia" that Hass indicts and furthers our cultural tendency to relegate poetry to an art of the quotidian. Hass has given us a book that is both timely and necessary. "It is," as he writes, "good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us."

Jessica Fisher and Margaret Ronda
Oakland, Calif.

PUBLIC FUNDS AND RISK

James Surowiecki, in addressing sovereign wealth funds, states that public-employee pension funds account for forty per cent of all institutional investment in the United States (The Financial Page, November 26th). In fact, public pension funds account for only

How THE OTHER HALF CHILLS.



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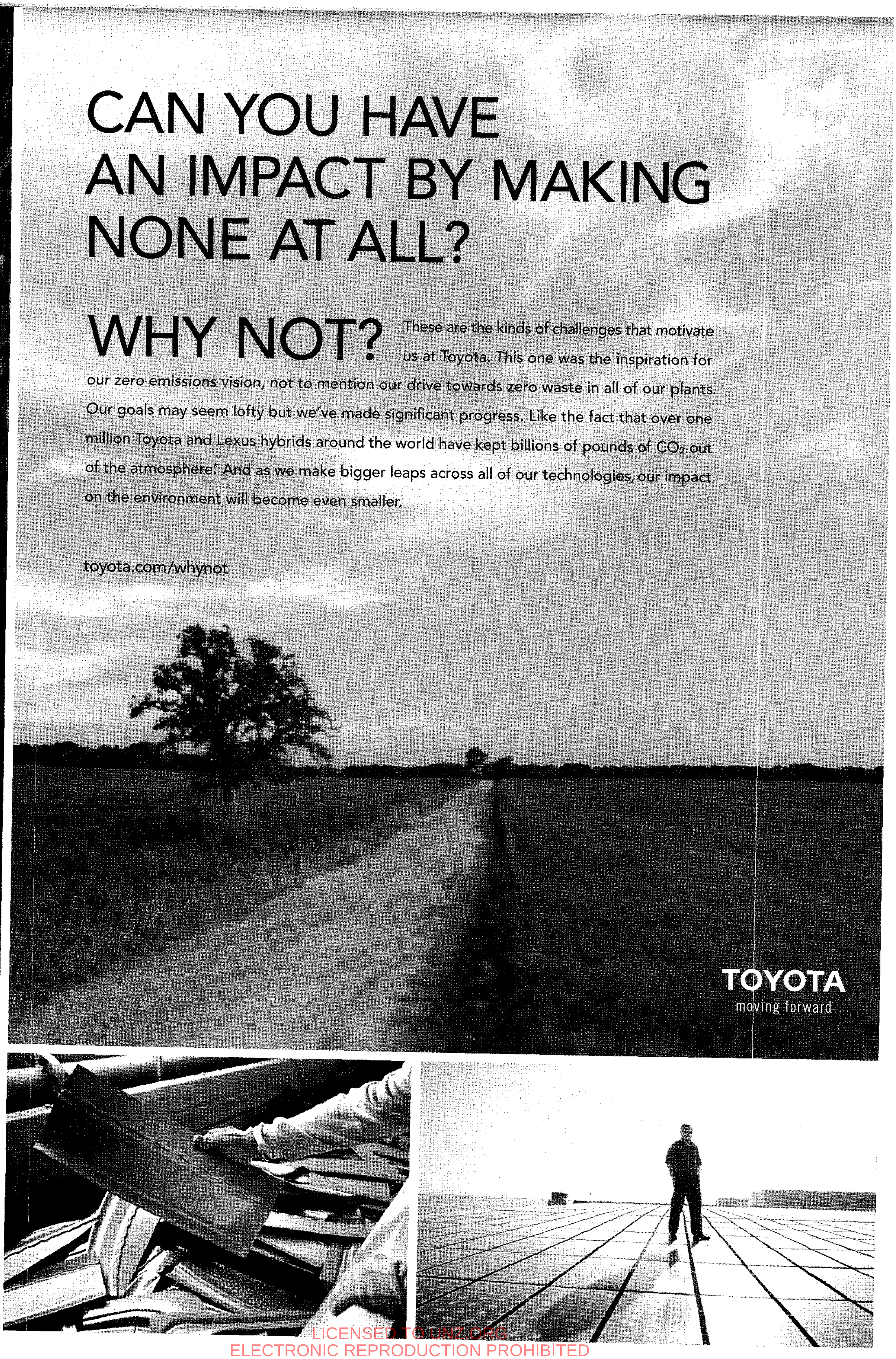

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RAYMOND CARVER

Gordon Lish's
edit of "Beginners,"
line by line

•

Manuscript pages,
photographs, and
a memoir by
Richard Ford

PLUS

Jhumpa Lahiri reads
a William Trevor story

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eleven per cent of institutional investment. The largest percentages come from insurance companies (twenty-three per cent), open-end mutual funds (twenty-four per cent), and private trusteed funds (twenty per cent), most of which are corporate pension plans. But, because most public pension plans are underfunded, they have assumed high levels of risk. Compared with other institutional investors, public pension plans supply a disproportionate share of the capital raised by hedge funds and private equity funds. One estimate is that twenty-six per cent of the capital invested in private equity originates with public pension funds. Not only is this potentially dangerous; it abounds in irony. For example, Connecticut, where numerous tax-advantaged private equity and hedge funds are headquartered, also has one of the most underfunded public-employee pension plans in the United States. We should put our own house in order before lashing out at foreign sovereign funds.

Sanford M. Jacoby
Professor of Management and Public Policy
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, Calif.

CONFRONTING PREJUDICE

Jeffrey Toobin, in his review of Clarence Thomas's new book, "My Grandfather's Son," offers a clear explanation for Justice Thomas's resentment toward the white élite (Books, November 12th). Toobin points out that Thomas has come full circle—from being the victim of racism, then the beneficiary of obvious affirmative action, and, finally, loathing the preferential treatment. But perhaps Thomas's transparent vehemence actually reinforces the need for an alternative to affirmative action, as it is evident that prejudice combined with reverse prejudice does nothing but cause confusion and anger. Sure, it assuages guilt for past wrongs, and gives opportunity to those born unto oppression; but, at the same time, it brands those who succeed, thus reinforcing the very prejudice that it seeks to negate. Despite the ignorant bias of his own perspective, Clarence Thomas, rightfully furious in his frustration with our nation's response to racism, may be the greatest argument against affirmative action.

Brendan Hayward
Santa Monica, Calif.

FICTIONAL REALITY

James Wood, in his excellent piece on "War and Peace," notes both Tolstoy's skepticism "that any narrative can describe a historical event successfully" and his aggressiveness in "writing a form of history himself" through his many essayistic digressions (Books, November 26th). If history can be understood "only by admitting the most infinitesimal units for observation," as Tolstoy believed, then rationality proves inadequate; it cannot keep track of all the minute, multitudinous interactions of human motivation, or make them sensible; and the essays are a waste of time. But perhaps the essays serve merely as crude pointers to Tolstoy's real attempt to write history: the fictional narrative. Fiction, when it is made so truly reflective of reality that it seems a "piece of life," can communicate complexities of history that cannot be corralled within the strictures of rational analysis. The fictional narrative channels to the subconscious a sense of historical cause and effect that is often too subtle for reason to grasp.

Nikhil Patel
New Haven, Conn.

CORRECTION: In his December 17th piece, "None of the Above," Malcolm Gladwell states that Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, in their 1994 book "The Bell Curve," proposed that Americans with low I.Q.s be "sequestered in a 'high-tech' version of an Indian reservation." In fact, Herrnstein and Murray deplored the prospect of such "custodialism" and recommended that steps be taken to avert it. We regret the error.

•

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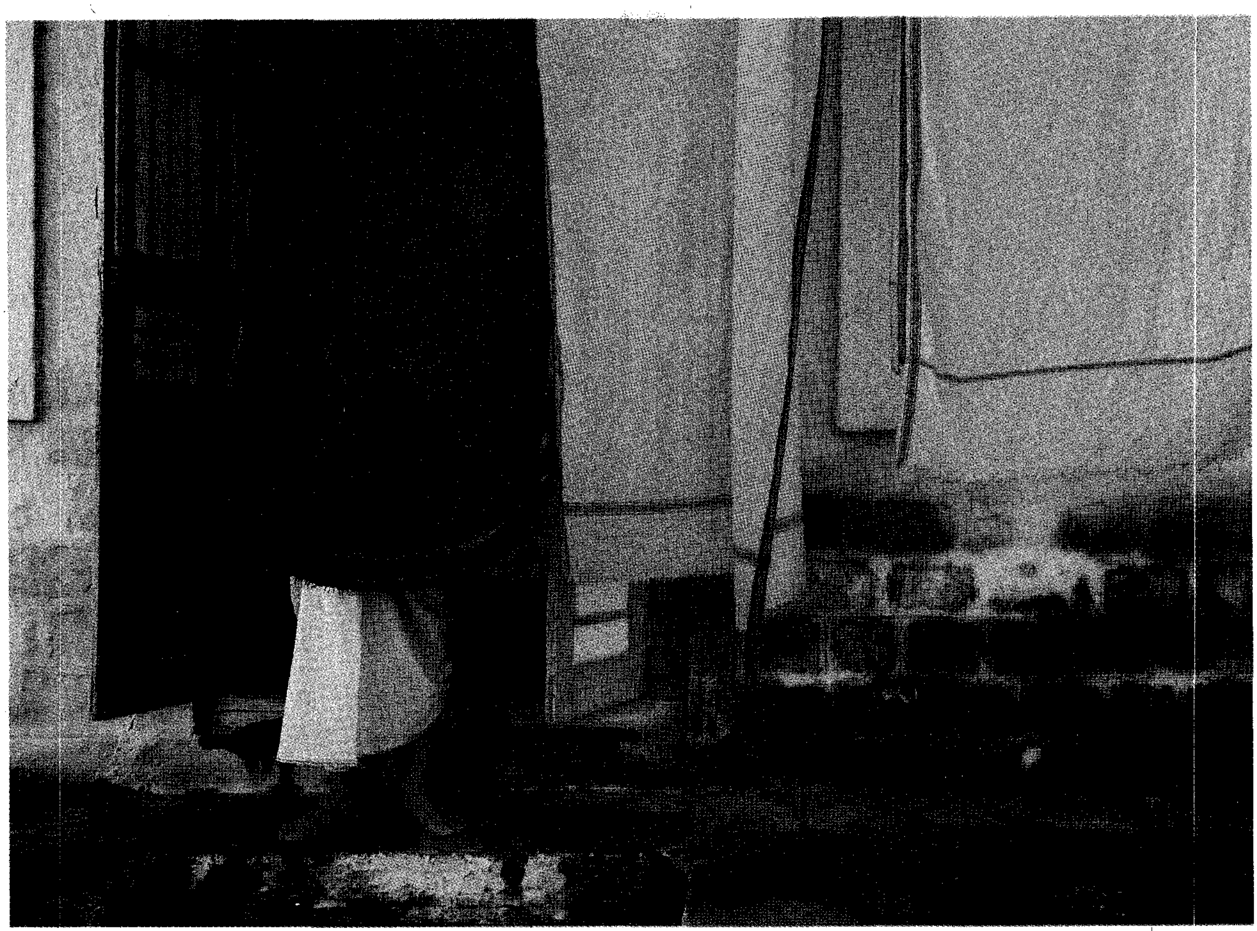

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Classical Theatre of Harlem's adaptation of Langston Hughes's "Black Nativity." Photograph by Landon Nordeman.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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			19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1				

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
PRESIDENTIAL PATTER

David Mamet's latest play, "November," premièring at the Barrymore, stars Nathan Lane, Laurie Metcalf, and Dylan Baker. In the comedy, which takes place in the course of a single day, Lane plays a President campaigning to be elected for a second term. Joe Mantello directs. (See page 20.)

NIGHT LIFE
A SEASON OF GIVING

The gifted songwriter, guitarist, and singer Teddy Thompson—the son of Richard and Linda Thompson, the first couple of British folk rock—has organized a holiday show at the Highline Ballroom that has its heart in the right place. The show has a stellar lineup, including his fellow musical offspring Rufus Wainwright (Loudon's son) and Jenni Muldaur (Maria's daughter), as well as Sonya Kitchell, Tift Merritt, and Christina Courtin. All proceeds go to relief efforts in Darfur. (See page 24.)

ART
OPEN-DOOR POLICY

"Closed on Monday" is the rule at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but the holiday season is an exception. The Met will be open from 9:30 to 5:30 on both Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. (See page 26.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
NO-CAROL ZONE

For those New Yorkers who wish to avoid the monotonous crush of holiday music, several of the city's experimentalist trailblazers (including the accordionist and composer Pauline Oliveros, the esteemed S.E.M. Ensemble, and the exciting string quartet Ethel) will offer potent avant-garde alternatives. (See page 32.)

MOVIES
LONG ISLAND

With the recent rise of filmmaking from mainland China, Taiwan's directors have receded into the shadows. Anthology Film Archives offers a weekend of recent Taiwanese documentaries, including "The Rhythm in Wulu Village," Wang Chun-Hsiung's report from the remote and mountainous Bunun region. (See page 38.)

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
MUSICAL YOUTH

If you want to know what the kids were up to in 2007, stop by Madison Square Garden on Dec. 21 and let five young people fill you in. First, there's the Atlanta rapper Soulja Boy Tell Em, who recorded a song called "Crank Dat"—it's also a ringtone and the accompaniment to a dance—which has been ubiquitous for the past several months. Appearing on the same bill will be the New York rapper Lil Mama, who recorded the year's best song about makeup (the thundering "Lip Gloss"), and the Jamaican-American singer Sean Kingston, who was responsible for the thin and irresistible "Beautiful Girls," which is largely Ben E. King's "Stand by Me." The other two performers—Bow Wow and Chris Brown—are young men vying to please a wide variety of people: girls, their dates, tough guys, and anyone comfortable with the fact that R. & B. and pop are now roughly the same thing. Bow Wow is a slightly more convincing ladies' man, and Brown is a better dancer. The shadow of Michael Jackson will be present.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

C'EST DUCKIE!
P.S. 122 presents an off-site production of a cabaret by the London-based troupe Duckie. Previews begin Dec. 20. Opens Dec. 23. (CSV Cultural Center, 107 Suffolk St. 212-352-3101.)

THE LITTLE MERMAID
Francesca Zambello directs an adaptation of the film, with a book by Doug Wright and music and lyrics by Alan Menken, Howard Ashman, and Glenn Slater. In previews. (Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747.)

NOVEMBER
Nathan Lane, Laurie Metcalf, and Dylan Baker star in David Mamet's new comedy, about an incumbent President seeking a second term. Joe Mantello directs. Previews begin Dec. 20. (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY
This Steppenwolf transfer by Tracy Letts ("Bug") is about the disappearance of an Oklahoma family man. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Imperial, 245 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

BECKETT SHORTS
New York Theatre Workshop presents four one-act plays by Samuel Beckett: "Act Without Words," Parts I and II, "Eh Joe," and "Rough for Theatre I." Mikhail Baryshnikov stars; Philip Glass provides original music. (79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

BLACK NATIVITY
Alfred Preisser's high-spirited revival of Langston Hughes's 1961 gospel theatre work plays fast and loose with the original. Nominally, Preisser's new setting is Forty-second Street in 1973, on a block rife with dealers, prostitutes, and triple-X marquees. But, once the action moves inside, it's pure Technicolor gospel fantasy, replete with a sparkly red curtain, a cast of dozens, and a groovy four-piece band. The divertissements are presided over by a deliciously over-the-top narrator (André De Shields, in a bright-red suit), who prances and preaches to everything from funk to Motown to "Silent Night." Along the way, Mary and Joseph get turned away, the baby Jesus arrives (in jaw-dropping fashion), and moments of unexpected and affecting stillness occur, like the moonlit appearance of the Shangilia Youth Choir of Kenya, dressed in snow-white party outfits and holding hands. (The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Through Dec. 30.)

CUT TO THE CHASE
The vaudeville troupe Parallel Exit puts on a comedy show that incorporates magic, music, tap, and slapstick. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 30.)

THE DEVIL'S DISCIPLE
George Bernard Shaw's 1897 melodrama is set in the U.S. during the Revolutionary War. (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

DIMAGGIO—THE MAN BEHIND THE MYTH
A new musical about the Yankee Clipper, with book, music, and lyrics by Robert Mitchell. Directed and choreographed by Don Johanson. (Wings, 154 Christopher St. 212-627-2961. Through Dec. 22.)

DR. SEUSS' HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS! THE MUSICAL
Handsomely wrapped and faithful to the book, this production is as attractive as a window display at Saks, but it doesn't have any garlic in its soul. Still, Christmas-weary parents will likely appreciate the stage show's charm and restraint. (St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

DORIS TO DARLENE, A CAUTIONARY VALENTINE
Les Waters's crackling direction gives depth and sheen to Jordan Harrison's bright-pink valentine to music-loving romantics from three centuries. In Bavaria in the eighteen-sixties, a wild-eyed Richard Wagner (David Chandler) is writing "Liebestod" for his lovesick teen-age patron, King Ludwig II (a bold Laura Heisler, in drag). Meanwhile, a slippery nineteen-sixties record producer in a skinny tie (the magnetic Michael Crane) is borrowing Wagner's melody for a girl-group hit, which will be listened to (over and over) in the present day by an angst-ridden gay suburban teen with a crush on his elusive music teacher (Tom Nelis). Amid the heady whirl of characters and sound cues on the mod revolving set, Waters returns repeatedly to the piece's home key: affection for the stubborn innocence that feeds fancies. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 23.)

EDWARD THE SECOND
Red Bull Theatre presents Garland Wright's adaptation of the play by Christopher Marlowe, about a profligate young king. (Peter Jay Sharp, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE FARNSWORTH INVENTION
Hank Azaria and Jimmi Simpson star in a new play by Aaron Sorkin. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE HOMECOMING
Raúl Esparza, Ian McShane, Eve Best, and Michael McKean star in Harold Pinter's play from 1967. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

IS HE DEAD?
In Mark Twain's recently discovered 1898 farce (adapted by David Ives, and directed masterfully by Michael Blakemore), the painter Jean-François Millet (Norbert Leo Butz) stages his own death in order to raise the value of his masterpieces. Millet reappears, in drag, as his grieving sister, the Widow Tillou, and is held captive, artistically and emotionally, by the fiendish art dealer Bastien André (the superb, serpentine Byron Jennings). André will have either Millet's paintings or his "sister." As the Widow Tillou's bank account grows after Millet's supposed death, so does André's ardor for her. In accordance with the craziness of farce logic, the only way for the Widow Tillou to persuade André to cancel his punitive contract with Millet is by marrying him. Caprice has its day; in the sure hands of Blakemore, Ives, and the well-drilled supporting cast, it also has its victory. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/17/07.) (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

MAN IS MAN
Paul Binnerts directs Bertolt Brecht's play from 1926, about a porter in colonial India who becomes a soldier. (HERE Arts Center, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101. Through Dec. 22.)

MAUDIE & JANE
Luciano Nattino adapted a novel by Doris Lessing for this drama, in which a bag lady persuades a fashion editor to take care of her. Judith Malina and Pat Russell star. (Living Theatre, 19 Clinton St. 212-352-3101.)

NO DICE
Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, a new flock of downtown-theatre wunderkinds, returns to New York after an extensive European tour with its four-hour epic of the everyday. The show, though at times a test of the audience's endurance as much as the actors', cleverly plumbs the surprising depths of the shallowest of arts—small talk. Culled from more than a hundred hours of recorded telephone conversations and performed in the style of amateur dinner theatre (ham sandwiches included), with the aid of line-feeding iPods, the results are like a poignant and charmingly nutty mashup of a Christopher Guest mockumentary and a Wooster Group-style deconstruction. The riveting Anne Gridley gives a standout performance, snarling and

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– STEPHEN WILLIAMS, *NEWSDAY*

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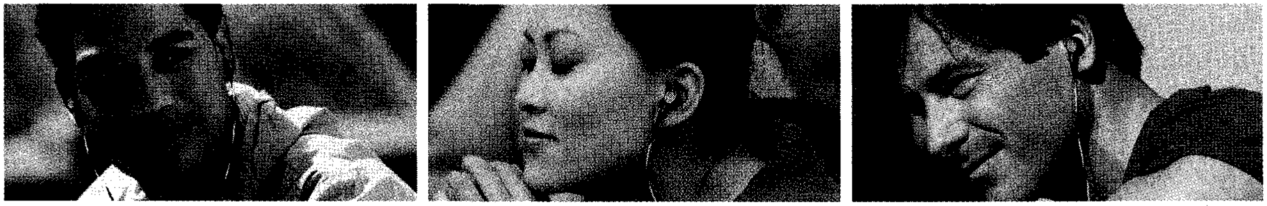

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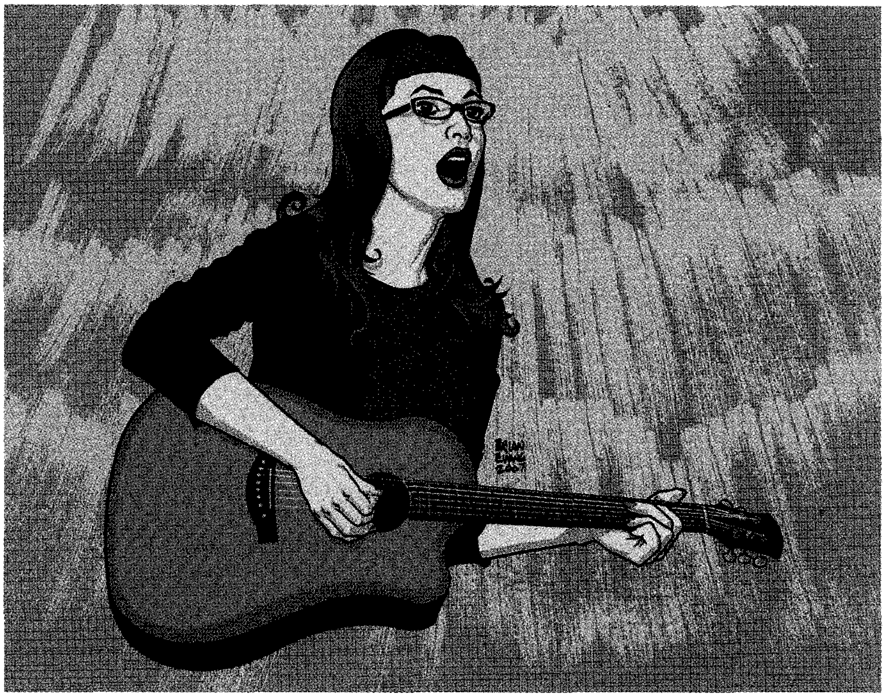
twitching through her lines like a French fashionista in the throes of a perpetual sneeze. (66 White St. 212-868-4444. Through Dec. 30.)

OH, THE HUMANITY AND OTHER EXCLAMATIONS
Five penetrating short plays by Will Eno, who wrote "Thom Pain (Based on Nothing)," find ordinary characters—a sports coach, an airline spokeswoman, a pair of lonely souls—caught in moments of paralyzing uncertainty. Marisa Tomei, who exudes warmth even in the cold light of Eno's blankly existential scenarios, stars alongside Brian Hutchison, a sad-eyed Everyman with Little League-dad good looks. In an hour's running time, they offer a banquet of bleakness. Each playlet displays Eno's ability to marry the quotidian and the metaphysical, the mournful and the mordantly funny. In one scene, two photographers instruct their subjects—us—to look "more mortal." It's a testament to this modest production that we are willing to oblige them. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)



The singer-songwriter Ingrid Michaelson pays a visit to the Bowery Ballroom.

BRIAN EWING

OUR SINATRA
A musical revue featuring the songs of Ol' Blue Eyes. (Broadway Comedy Club, 318 W. 53rd St. 212-239-6200.)

PIAF: LOVE CONQUERS ALL
In this one-woman show written by Roger Peace, Naomi Emmerson, as the iconic French singer Edith Piaf, tells her life story—born into poverty in Paris in 1915, raised in a brothel, discovered while singing in the streets, followed by tragic loves, international stardom, and morphine addiction. Emmerson sings Piaf's songs ("Milord," "La Vie en Rose," "L'Accordioniste") with brio, capably handling the challenging material and hitting near-Piafian emotional heights. The narrative, delivered in French-accented English and punctuated with a distracting, stagy chuckle, is less successful, and feels both oversimplified and overlong, but Piaf lovers willing to overlook a bit of schmalz will find enough here to satisfy. (SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555.)

PUMPGIRL
Abbie Spallen's play is a series of interlinking monologues—a sort of trifecta of talk—about a butch Irish gas-station attendant, the provincial lout with whom she has an affair, and his return to his sour wife. The piece, which is well written, is really a tone poem. You can shut your eyes and understand everything the playwright is saying—it's not a theatrical experience but a literary one. (City Center, Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

RUNT OF THE LITTER
The Houston Oiler turned actor and playwright Bo Eason seems more like a motivational speaker than like a tragic hero in this semi-autobiographical solo show about a football player's obsession with beating his lifelong rival—his brother—in the Super Bowl. In the hour leading up to the game he has spent twenty years preparing for, Jack Henry recounts his life as an underdog in the shadow of a favored sibling. Along the way, there are four knee surgeries and appearances by characters ranging from a tough-loving, foulmouthed father to naysayer college coaches. Unfortunately, a couple of innocuously entertaining anecdotes, a mildly unnerving final moment, and Eason's handsome looks and easy warmth are not enough to keep the thin script afloat. (37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-307-4100.)

THE SEAFARER
Splendidly written and directed by Conor McPherson, this play begins on Christmas Eve, as the strapping and saturnine Sharky (David Morse) has returned to his family home to attend to his older brother, Richard (the wonderful Jim Norton), who has recently gone blind but who nonetheless rules the chaotic roost. Alone or with his feral, round-shouldered sidekick, Ivan (the hilarious Conleth Hill), Richard spends most of his time cadging drinks, pouring drinks, ordering drinks, or reminiscing about drinks. An elegant stranger, Mr. Lockhart (Ciarán Hinds), is brought by a friend to join in the house's Christmas festivities: a game of poker. Lockhart is not just a big spender but the Devil in disguise, come to play for Sharky's soul. New York rarely sees the kind of stellar, freewheeling playing that makes McPherson's tragicomic spectacle of dereliction come so alive. "The Seafarer" breaks through our secular smugness and manages to make the small gestures of connection, charity, and change feel like the true resurrection. (12/17/07) (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

YELLOW FACE
David Henry Hwang's play starts off as a blithe retelling of the protest he led, in 1991, when the producers of "Miss Saigon" cast a Caucasian actor in a Vietnamese role. Soon afterward, as Hwang (Hoon Lee) tells it, he shrugged off the mantle of ethnic spokesperson and returned to playwriting, but the insidiousness of American racism followed him, as well as his father (Francis Jue), who was part of a banking scandal that implicated Chinese-Americans. Hwang's account—self-effacing, fabulously inventive, and cheapened only by his occasional caricatured representations of real people—is pointed in its criticisms of specific politicians, producers, and journalists. But Hwang makes his most unsparing observations about himself, offering hard-won lessons about leading a public life with personal integrity. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through Dec. 23.)

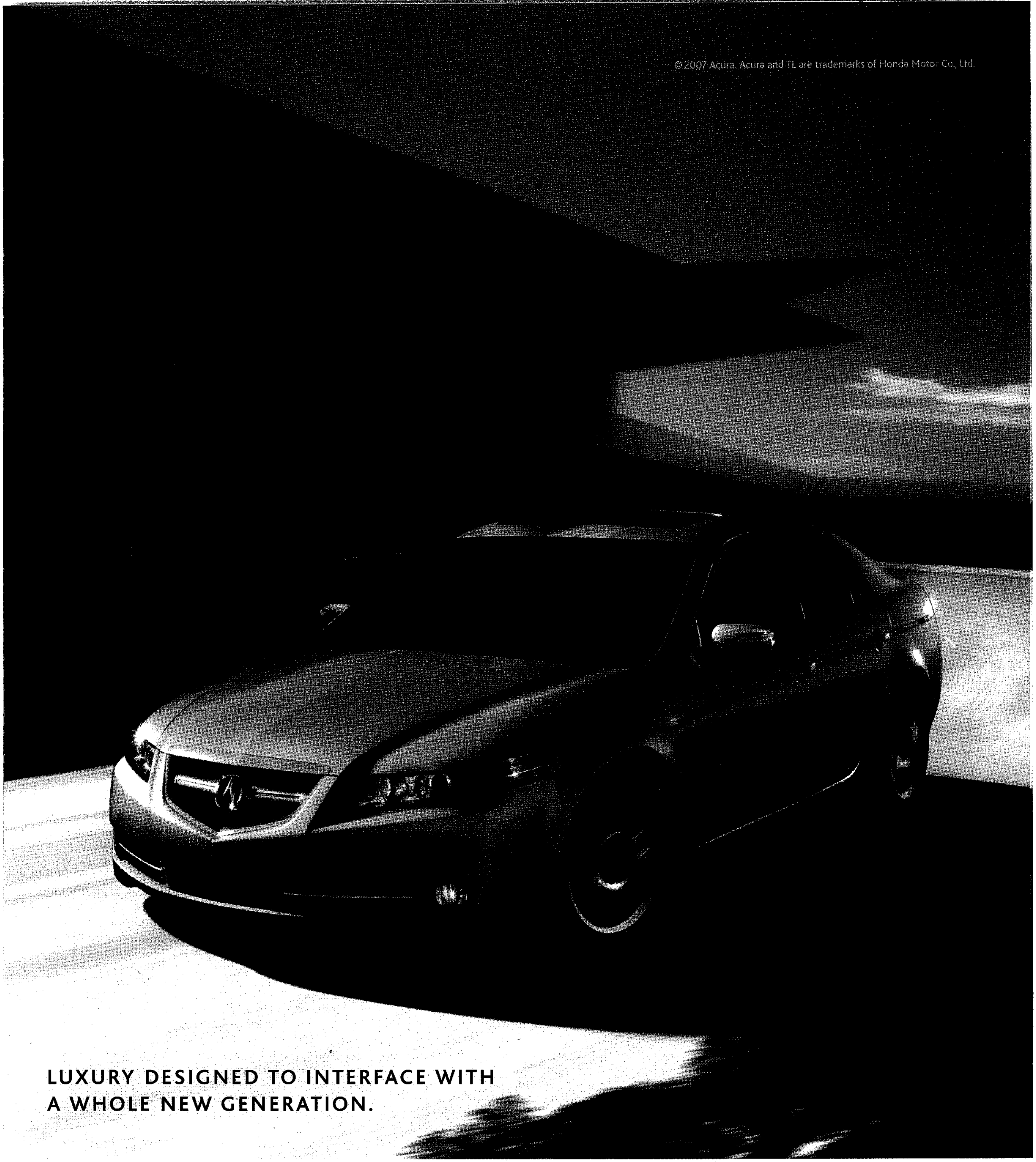
Also Playing

AVENUE Q: Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **A BRONX TALE:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **THE BROTHERS SIZE:** Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through Dec. 23. **CHICAGO:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **A CHORUS LINE:** Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THE COLOR PURPLE:** Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200. **THE CONSTANT COUPLE:** Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802. Through Dec. 23. **CURTAINS:** Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **CYMBELINE:** Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **CYRANO DE BERGERAC:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200. **DAI (ENOUGH):** 47th Street Theatre, 304 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **DIE MOMMIE DIE!:** New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. **THE DROWSY CHAPERONE:** Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-307-4100. **FUERZABRUTA:** Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E. 212-239-6200. **THE GLORIOUS ONES:** Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **GONE MISSING:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **HAIRSPRAY:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **JUMP:** Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 212-307-4100. **LEGALLY BLONDE THE MUSICAL:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-307-4100. **THE LION KING:** Minskoff, 220 W. 45th St. 212-307-4747. **MAMMA MIA!:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200. **MARY POPPINS:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4747. **MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **THE OVERWHELMING:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. Through Dec. 23. **PETER AND JERRY:** Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422. Through Dec. 30. **THE PIANO TEACHER:** Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303. Through Dec. 23. **QUEENS BOULEVARD (THE MUSICAL):** Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. **THE RECEPTIONIST:** City Center, Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Through Dec. 30. **ROCK 'N' ROLL:** Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **SPEECH & DEBATE:** Roundabout Underground, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **TINGS DEY HAPPEN:** Culture Project, 55 Mercer St. 212-352-3101. Through Dec. 22. **TRUMPERY:** Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 30. **THE 25TH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE:** Circle in the Square, 50th St. between Broadway and Eighth Ave. 212-239-6200. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100. **XANADU:** Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN:** Hilton, 213 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4100.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Dec. 26-27: The **School of Rock All-Stars**, a group of kids from the original Paul Green School of Rock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Music (which was around long before the Jack Black movie), cover the classic-rock songbook—the music of their parents (and, in some cases, their grandparents). Dec. 31: **Dickey Betts**, the former Allman Brothers guitarist and songwriter (most notably of "Ramblin' Man"), hoists the flag of Southern rock. Later that night, the **Rebirth Brass Band** punctuates the arrival of 2008 with a New Orleans blast.

BEACON THEATRE

Broadway at 74th St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 28-29 and Dec. 31: **Gov't Mule,** the bristling Allman Brothers offshoot led by the slide guitarist Warren Haynes, rings in the New Year.

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Dec. 19: The Staten Island-based singer-songwriter **Ingrid Michaelson's** sentimental and slithery songs have popped up in living rooms across America, having been used in television commercials (for Old Navy and Chevrolet) and serial dramas (such as "Grey's Anatomy"). She isn't on a major label yet, but, presumably, that won't be the case for long. Dec. 20: "A Very Bowery Christmas" puts a local spin on the holidays, with sets by the **Knockout Drops, Wormburner,** the **YuleDogs** (featuring members of the Bogmen), and **Lifeguard Nights.** Dec. 29-31: The punk-rock poetess **Patti Smith** and her band hold their now customary New Year's shows. Later on New Year's Eve, the hard-driving art-school refugees **Les Savy Fav.**

FILLMORE NEW YORK AT IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Dec. 20-21: The Long Island eighties hair-metal veterans **Twisted Sister** went in a new direction last year with the release of "Twisted Christmas," an album of amped-up holiday songs—a stunt not completely expected from the band responsible for such headbanger anthems as "Burn in Hell" and "Sin After Sin." As it turns out, their renditions of "Oh Come All Ye Faithful," "White Christmas," and the like were surprisingly well received, and a new tradition was born. Dec. 28-29: Though the current incarnation of the **New York Dolls** features only two original members, they remain the preëminent proto-punk band of record. Last year's comeback album, "One Day It Will Please Us to Remember Even This," proved not only that they can still slap on the mascara with aplomb but that they are still capable of making hard-rocking music. Dec. 30: The upstate jam band phenomenon **moe.** warms up for its Radio City Music Hall show the following evening.

HIGHLINE BALLROOM

431 W. 16th St. (212-414-5994)—Dec. 19: A holiday show to benefit Save Darfur, with **Teddy Thompson**—whose latest album, "Upfront & Down Low," finds the young singer-songwriter craftily commandeering a raft of classic country tunes—and many other artists, including **Rufus Wainwright, Martha Wainwright,** and **Tift Merritt.**

JOE'S PUB

425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Dec. 21-22: Roughly six months after offering her songs, including the cult favorite "Calling All Angels," online with "self-determined pricing," the ethereal-voiced Canadian singer-songwriter Jane Siberry decided, on June 3, 2006, that she would henceforth be known as **Issa.** She also divested herself of a home in Toronto and most of her worldly possessions. Such wandering-spirit actions are in line with her music, which for more than two decades has embraced everything from folk and art-pop to electronica and jazz. Later on Dec. 22: **Rachelle Garniez,** the Brooklyn-based composer, accordionist, and chanteuse, whose voice is both devilish and sublime, celebrates the release of her new CD, "Melusine Years," in which she follows in the tradition of Goethe, André Breton, A. S. Byatt, and other artists who have tangled with the water faerie of European legend. Even later on Dec. 22: The transgender accordionist **Baby Dee** spent much of the previous decade riding a custom tricycle outfitted with a harp around Greenwich Village and singing Shirley Temple covers. More recently, she has fallen in with a fast young crowd; the band on her invigorating soon-to-be-released album, "Safe Inside the Day," includes the singer Bonnie (Prince) Billy, the guitarist Matt Sweeney, and the drummer and party madman Andrew W.K. Dee, for her part, sticks mostly to the piano, to great effect, especially on the ragtimey future barroom standard "Big Titty Bee Girl (From Dino Town)." With the torchy songs of the New York institution **Little Annie** (who has also been known to answer to Annie Anxiety and Annie Bandez throughout her career, which includes stints at Max's Kansas City and many an experimental phase).

KNITTING FACTORY

74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3132)—Dec. 19: **Dewey Cox.** The actor and comedian John C. Reilly is touring as the fictional music star (think Johnny Cash meets Roy Orbison meets Waylon Jennings), whose full story is told in the mock bio-pic "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story," which opens on Dec. 21.

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 21: A night of hip-hop and R. & B. with **Bow Wow, Chris Brown, Lil Mama, Soulja Boy Tell Em, Sean Kingston,** and others. Dec. 22: Though some would write off **Ozzy Osbourne** as a reality-show casualty, the infernal, albeit slightly doddering, heavy-metal legend is unbowed, returning to the Garden for the first time in two decades. With the slightly campier (if that's even possible) **Rob Zombie** as a special guest.

MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG

66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn (718-486-5400)—Dec. 21: **Murphy's Law,** comedic veterans of New York's eighties hardcore scene, surfaces periodically to extol the merits of irresponsible behavior. Dec. 31: The raucous Guns N' Roses tribute band **Mr. Brownstone** is fronted by Sean Greenhalgh, who is also a member of a slightly more famous and esteemed act, the exuberant indie-rock ensemble Clap Your Hands Say Yeah.

NASSAU COLISEUM

1255 Hempstead Turnpike, Uniondale (212-307-7171)—Dec. 27-28: **Miley Cyrus,** the singer and actress who stars as the pop sensation **Hannah Montana** in the cable-television show of the same name. Tickets to concerts featuring the chart-topping teenager (who is the daughter of the country singer Billy Ray Cyrus) have proved to be the Cabbage Patch Kids of this year's holiday season. Their scarcity has had parents and fans paying all kinds of prices (and pulling all kinds of strings) to secure them.

RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL

Sixth Ave. at 50th St. (212-308-7171)—Dec. 31: The jamming quintet **moe.** shows its moe.rons (as its fans are affectionately known) a good time.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

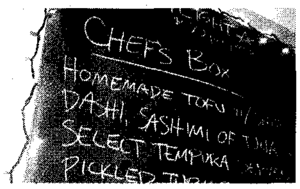
BIRDLAND

315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Dec. 19-22: Here, **Freddy Cole** won't have the support of Bill Charlap and his trio, who graced his enchanting new album, "Music Maestro Please," but Cole's vocal prowess and his own skillful piano work are guaranteed to please. Dec. 23-25: Now an annual musical institution, "Bending Towards the Light: A Jazz Nativity" features such notable performers as the cornettist **Warren Vaché,** the singer **Hilary Kole** (who is also here with **Chico O'Farrill's Jazz Orchestra,** on New Year's Eve), the trombonist **Steve Turre,** and the trumpeter **Lew Soloff.** On the first night, the pianist **Hank Jones,** the saxophonist **Jimmy Heath,** and the trombonist **Wycliffe Gordon** will also be on hand. Dec. 26-29: **George Coleman** is a veteran tenor-saxophone player who combines bebop expertise with a gritty edge that bespeaks his deep Memphis roots.

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Dec. 26-31: The keyboardist **Chick Corea** has

TABLES FOR TWO
BARFRY



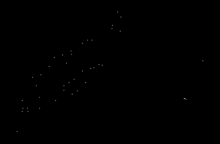
SARAH MANGERSON

50 Carmine St. (212-929-5050)—At BarFry, the gleaming white tiles, metallic accents, numerous mirrors, and faint oleaginous odor can give one the sensation of being immersed in a giant cooking vat. The name is a play on "barfly": the first half of it is apparent in the stainless-steel counter that dominates the room and the second half in the emphasis on tempura, which the chef, Josh DeChellis, applies to everything from eggplant to shrimp to a pork cutlet. The less appealing effect of that last word, though, might pose an obstacle to BarFry's potential clientele; hearing the name, one usually adventurous eater sniffed, "What woman wants to go to a place where everything is fried?"

More to the point, who wants to eat food that hasn't been fried *well*? Here, the tempura batter tended to be thick, wet, and tasteless, and turned things as disparate as pumpkin and avocado into indistinguishable lumps. The kitchen doesn't bother with timing and everything comes out in one fell swoop, often leaving the tempura lingering long past its optimal consumption time. Several po'boys, with fried fillings like shrimp and pork, did right by the eponymous technique: they were messy and delicious, and big enough to share. For the most part, though, the best stuff on the menu goes nowhere near the deep fryer, and some of the very best shows up only as specials. Wasabi-and-olive-oil pickles were tart and suitable for palate prepping. Vibrant scarlet cherry tomatoes were sweet and zippy, thanks to *sriracha*, which also showed up in a velvety steak tartare. A salad of glazed octopus featured tentacles with disturbingly large suckers, but the flesh was tender and pickled turnips gave it snap.

Other elements contribute an effect that is slightly off kilter: the acoustics are dismal, the furniture feels flimsy, and the paper menus—complete with a MapQuest-esque printout of the restaurant's location—look amateurish. A couple was greeted with an incongruous bit of patter: "Everything's meant to be shared, so it's great for groups!" It's telling that a popular new restaurant a couple of doors down has started sending their waiting customers to get a drink at BarFry; perhaps the place should keep the emphasis on the first syllable, after all. (Open daily for lunch and dinner. Dishes $4-$15.)

—*Andrea Thompson*



TASTE.

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GREEN
& BLACK'S
ORGANIC

Dark Chocolate

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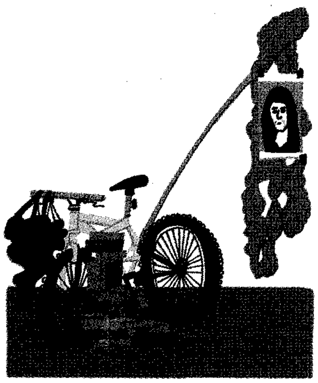
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
THE THING ITSELF

The new New Museum is a svelte stack of fine, white spaces, and its first show, "Unmonumental," of junk sculpture by thirty international artists, is auspicious. Consolidating an anti-fashionable fashion in contemporary art, the exhibition addresses seriously hip folk, who needn't be briefed on the precedents: Schwitters, Rauschenberg, Cady Noland. The doyenne of this return to jury-rigged detritus is Rachel Harrison; her shiny dirt bike, atilt on pigment-slathered blocks and accessorized with rock-filled handbags and a photograph of Mel Gibson in "Braveheart," stars. Antic parsimony rules. A conservative spirit pertains. Most of the works are neat and clean. You could take them home, and, in the case of powerful congeries of this and that by Isa Genzken, you might want to. At issue is a restoration of studio romance (the artist in what-the-hell action) after a spate of market sex (the artist as deluxe fabricator). This is brave news. The show will be augmented, in stages, with collages, sound installations, and digital whatnot.



—Peter Schjeldahl

never given up on full-force fusion. His longtime group the Elektric Band now features the bassist **Victor Wooten,** a mainstay of Béla Fleck and the Flecktones.

CAFÉ CARLYLE
Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—Through Dec. 31: The singer **Steve Tyrell** turns on the holiday charm.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Dec. 18-24: The versatile singer **Ann Hampton Callaway** brings swing to seasonal songs. Dec. 26-31: The saxophonist **Paquito D'Rivera** and his Funk Tango ensemble ring in the New Year with a Latin beat.

FEINSTEIN'S AT LOEWS REGENCY
540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through Dec. 29: The pianist **Michael Feinstein** offers a program of endearing and ecumenical holiday fare.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Dec. 20-23: The seasoned drummer **Billy Hart** fronts a quartet fortified by gifted younger players, among them the pianist **Ethan Iverson** and the saxophonist **Mark Turner.** Dec. 27-30: The trumpeter **Chuck Mangione.** Dec. 31: The nonagenarian guitarist, technological innovator, and inveterate wiseacre **Les Paul** ushers in the New Year, assisted by his always game trio.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Dec. 18-23: Jazz and New Orleans funk come together when **Dr. Lonnie Smith,** a modern master of the Hammond B3 organ, hooks up with the trumpeter **Nicholas Payton** and the saxophonist **Donald Harrison,** two Big Easy natives. Dec. 27-29: The versatile Brazilian group **Trio da Paz. Kenny Barron,** the dean of mainstream jazz piano, joins the group Dec. 30-31.

KITANO
Park Ave. at 38th St. (212-885-7119)—Dec. 21-22: The elegant guitarist **Gene Bertoncini,** who celebrated his seventieth birthday earlier this year, remains a model of lyrical consistency. Dec. 31: The vibraphonist **Joe Locke.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Beneath **Cedar Walton's** mild-mannered surface is a jazzman of steely power and intelligence. The pianist, a renowned improviser and composer of durable jazz standards, is here with his trio Dec. 18-23. The following week, Dec. 25-30, the saxophonist **Vincent Herring** joins the group. Dec. 31-Jan. 6: **Dr. Michael White's Original Liberty Jazz Band of New Orleans.** The clarinettist and musicologist White celebrates the riches of jazz's first golden era.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"The Age of Rembrandt"** arrays all two hundred and twenty-eight of the Met's circa-seventeenth-century Dutch paintings according to the dates they were acquired. The dubious idea pays off, as odd juxtapositions of stupendous Rembrandts and Vermeers with radiant lesser masters (and intriguing faux Rembrandts) jolt the pictures to fresh attention. Through Jan. 6. ♦ **"Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary."** Through March 2. ♦ **"The Gates of Paradise: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece."** Through Jan. 13. ♦ **"Tara Donovan at the Met."** Through April 27. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9. Note: The museum will be open on Monday, Dec. 24, and Monday, Dec. 31, 9:30 to 5:30.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Martin Puryear."** Through Jan. 14. ♦ **"Georges Seurat: The Drawings,"** a thrilling and exhausting encounter with radical beauty, clarifies the short-lived artist's monumental revamping of pictorial space. Massy darks and filmy lights, in black conté crayon on textured paper, transpose visual weights and measures from three dimensions to two, abolishing Renaissance perspective in pictures of people and places that are easy to look at but impossible to really understand, what with their concatenating double effects of illusion and objectness, image and stuff, grace and crudity. Especially in earlyish works, from before "La Grande Jatte" and increasing stylization, Seurat plays hob with the automatic processing of sight in the brain, inducing a salutary aesthetic panic. Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"Lucian Freud: The Painter's Etchings."** Through March 10. ♦ **"New Perspectives in Latin American Art, 1930-2006: Selections from a Decade of Acquisitions."** Through Feb. 25. ♦ **"Projects 86: Gert & Uwe Tobias."** The Tobiases, twin brothers born in Transylvania and now living in Germany, make their art collaboratively. The woodcuts and bulbous ceramic sculptures here call to mind Eastern European folk art, Russian Constructivism, and the macabre visions of Goya and Munch. (Transylvania's most famous creation, Dracula, is also duly cited.) One tall, tensile sculpture conjures the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column." While the Tobiases' work cuts a wide swath materially and stylistically, its most interesting aspect may be its novelty-act approach. Through Feb. 25. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Richard Prince: Spiritual America."** Through Jan. 8. ♦ **"Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945."** Through Jan. 13. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See."** Weiner, a pioneer of language-based art, appears in finest fettle in his first U.S. retrospective: intelligent, provocative, allusive, and, for all his insistence on the word, vitally engaged with visual pleasure. Forty years' worth of work fits elegantly into the artist-designed installation, which intersperses his signature sans-serif wall texts—"drops of blue water forced over the rim of a pot made of clay," one reads—with works that realize conceptual instructions. (A chipped gray square is a "removal to the lathing or support wall of plaster or wallboard from a wall.") Early paintings, a flock of posters, and a vitrine of the artist's books, drawings, and multiples amplify the brio. Through Feb. 10. ♦ **"Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love."** Through Feb. 3. ♦ **"Beth Campbell: Following Room."** Through Feb. 24. ♦ **"Jacob Lawrence's 'Migration Series': Selections from the Phillips Collection."** The "Migration Series," completed in 1941, when Lawrence was twenty-four, is a tour de force of modern history painting. In flat, burnt colors, the seventeen panels on view here (there are sixty altogether) detail the South-to-North migration of black Americans after boll weevils ravaged the cotton crop; the crowded housing conditions that led to a tuberculosis epidemic; and the bombings encountered as they moved into new neighborhoods. The influence of Surrealism on the artist is evident, but the series also clarifies Lawrence's impact on such contemporary artists as Laylah Ali and Kara Walker. Through Jan. 6. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art."** Through Jan. 27. ♦ **"Brushed with Light: American Landscape Watercolors from the Collection."** Through Jan. 27. ♦ **"Global Feminisms Remix."** Through Feb. 3. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Water: H_2O = Life."** Through May 26. ♦ For

NAHO OGAWA

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the next few months, around five hundred specimens will flit through the Butterfly Conservatory, a pocket-size hothouse planted with orchids and other rain-forest flora. Through May 26. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (1724-1780)."** Through Jan. 27. ♦ The magisterial froufrou of the Fragonard Room, closed for renovation since June, is receiving visitors again. It looks the same as ever, thank goodness. But you may feel that your eyesight has improved—the result of new, color-sensitive lighting, which self-adjusts to daylight conditions. The refulgent glamour of Fragonard's suite of paintings, "The Progress of Love" (commissioned by Madame du Barry, who then rejected it, in 1773, as out of fashion), and the lapidary marvels of the attendant furniture, sculpture, ceramics, and bric-a-brac sing a bit more lambently. You might linger extra minutes to pity anew the deludedness of people who deem perfection to be beyond human reach. Ongoing. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—**"From The New Yorker to Shrek: The Art of William Steig."** Through March 16. ♦ **"Camille Pissarro: Impressions of City and Country."** Through Feb. 3. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45, and Thursdays, 11 to 8.)

MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"Painted with Words: Vincent van Gogh's Letters to Émile Bernard."** Through Jan. 6. ♦ **"Drawing Connections: Baselitz, Kelly, Penone, Rockburne, and the Old Masters."** Through Jan. 6. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

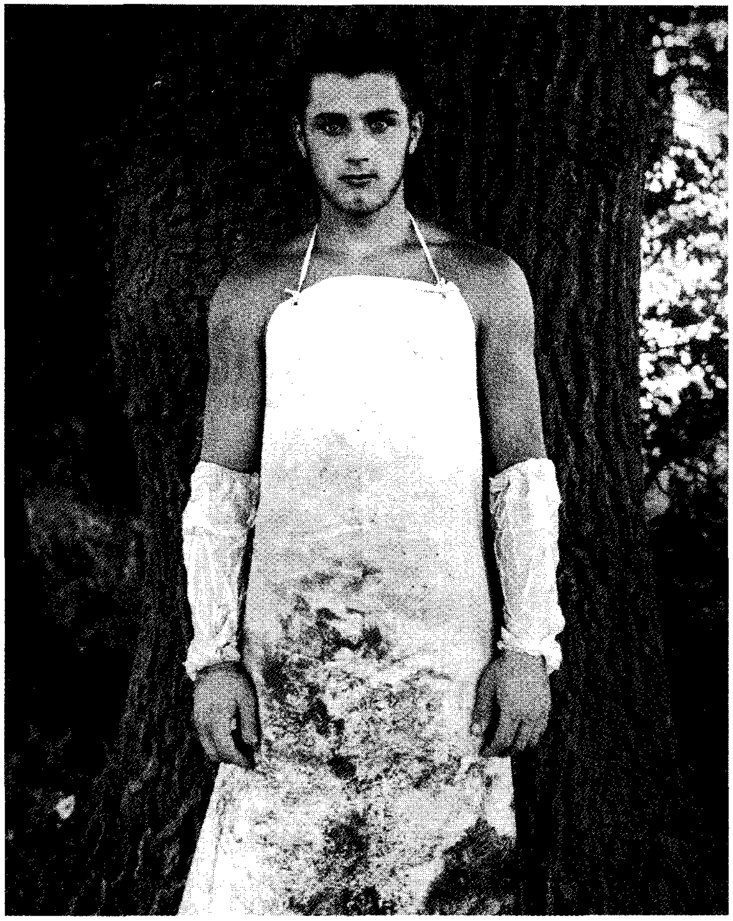
MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. (212-534-1672)—**"John Sloan's New York."** Through Feb. 24. ♦ **"The Glory Days: New York Baseball 1947-1957."** Through Dec. 31. ♦ **"Manhattan Noon: Photographs by Gus Powell."** Through March 16. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
235 Bowery, at Prince St. (212-219-1222)—The museum inaugurates its new building with **"Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century,"** an international survey of recent sculpture that examines the antiheroic tendency in contemporary art. Through March 23. (Open Wednesdays and weekends, noon to 6, and Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 10.)

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
170 Central Park W., at 77th St. (212-873-3400)—**"French Founding Father: Lafayette's Return to Washington's America."** Through Aug. 16, 2008. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6, and Friday evenings until 8.)

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
Fifth Ave. at 42nd St. (212-869-8089)—**"Multiple Interpretations"** is a selection of contemporary prints, conceived in series, that are new to the library's collection. Through Jan. 27. (Open Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 11 to 7:30, and Thursdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Kori Newkirk: 1997-2007."** You don't have to strain to see the influence of the elder statesman David Hammons in Newkirk's self-described "ghetto-fabulous conceptualism." Like Hammons, Newkirk is a trickster with a taste for oddball materials. Pony beads (the hair accessories made famous by Venus and Serena Williams in their teen-age years) are hung like curtains; elsewhere, hair pomade is used in lieu of pigment. There is a joyful aspect to Newkirk's work—the videos, particularly—that hinges more on celebration than on brooding critique. The mood might have something to do with the setting: Newkirk made a splash in the museum's 2001 survey "Freestyle," and you feel the love in his return to the institution that championed him. Through March 9. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)



Ingar Krauss's photograph "Untitled (Klaistow)," at Marvelli.

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

RICHARD MISRACH
This clever mini-retrospective, titled "13 Dark Pictures," touches on various points in Misrach's thirty-five-year career as a photographer of (among other things) the American West. Nodding pointedly to classic landscape views, he acknowledges the beauty of the desert and the spaciousness of Western skies, while keeping an eye on their corruption. The tone is vaguely ominous: a smudged cloud hovers like smoke in a pale-gold sky; an isolated figure floats (or sinks?) in a sea at dusk; and two young, down-and-out buddies, as wet as the street they stand on, find themselves at yet another dead end. Through Jan. 5. (Pace/MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999.)

FRANCESCA WOODMAN
Although Woodman's life as a photographer was brief—she committed suicide in 1981, at the age of twenty-two—it was vivid and productive. Few of the thirty-eight vintage prints shown here have been exhibited before, and many remain unpublished. Though they offer little new insight into her work (her inventiveness had its limits), they're consistently strong, often surreal explorations of a fragile, fragmented identity. Woodman was her own most reliable subject, so it's her body that animates many of these images; even when she appears to be hiding or erasing herself, she has a fascinating, tantalizing presence. Through Jan. 5. (Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160.)

Short List

TINO SEHGAL: Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through Jan. 5. **"DRAWING IN SPACE":** Feigen, 34 E. 69th St. 212-628-0700. Through Jan. 18. **"HANSEL AND GRETEL":** Gallery Met, Lincoln Center Plaza, at 65th St. 212-870-7441. Through Feb. 29.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

INGAR KRAUSS
The German photographer's remarkable new black-and-white portraits depict Eastern European migrant workers posed outdoors at the end of a day of harvesting. Facing the camera but rarely looking at it, the men stand alone, at once self-conscious and self-contained. Several of them are shirtless, and two are wearing nothing but knit undershorts, but there's no preening here, and little attempt at seduction. Like August Sander, Krauss remains at a certain remove from his subjects and records them with careful specificity. In these portraits, masculinity, dignity, and strength of character are more than abstract ideas. Through Jan. 5. (Marvelli, 526 W. 26th St. 212-627-3363.)

HIROSHI SUGITO
The Japanese painter has compared the movement of his brushes to a walk in the woods and also to playing the theremin. His fey landscapes, layered in acrylic paint and dry pigment, do suggest such amiable pursuits; with their lone floating clouds and ideographic trees, they could be illustrations for a children's book or stage sets for a quirky ballet. But there isn't enough at stake in these knowing confections, and the show goes out of kilter with a few hand-colored monotypes and a single construction of canvas, paper, and pipe cleaners. Through Jan. 5. (Klagsbrun, 526 W. 26th St. 212-243-3335.)

"DEATH WAR PROTEST LOVE"
Forget seasonal good cheer—this show of photojournalism is a dose of harsh reality, a smart, stinging slap in the face. Among the vintage press photographs on view are indelible news images of the past century, including the Hindenburg in flames, the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald, Ruth Snyder's death in the electric chair, and the hasty inauguration of Lyndon Johnson. Alongside them are prime examples of tabloid sensationalism (murders, suicides, car crashes; gangsters, molls, busty movie stars) and some genuine all-American horrors: the K.K.K., Charles Manson, Charles Starkweather, Kent State. Once again, you are there. Through Dec. 22. (Kasher, 521 W. 23rd St. 212-966-3978.)

"KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES"
In this group show, organized by the writer Jane Harris, the suburban neighbors have gone darkly bonkers. The girl next door is pole-dancing on

the porch of a serial rapist (in a video by Marion Wilson), while the boys are wrestling in erotic slo-mo and talking about bloated deer carcasses in the woods (in videos by Janet Biggs and Carol Saft, respectively). Mom is smoking something illegal (in photographs by LaToya Ruby Frazier), and others indulge in hobbies like shellacking the Spam (William Pope.L.) and decorating chicken and mouse skulls with fake antlers, like trophies in a kitschy Southwestern boutique (Alessandra Exposito). Through Jan. 5. (Schroeder Romero, 637 W. 27th St. 212-630-0722.)

Short List

JOSE ALVAREZ: The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Through Dec. 22. **JEREMY BLAKE:** Kinz, Tillou & Feigen, 529 W. 20th St. 212-929-0500. Through Jan. 5. **ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN:** Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410. Through Jan. 12. **BYRON DOBELL:** First Street Gallery, 526 W. 26th St. 646-336-8053. Through Dec. 22. **PIETER HUGO:** Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370. Through Jan. 12. **CARL OSTENDARP:** Dee, 545 W. 20th St. 212-924-7525. Through Jan. 12. **JOYCE PENSATO:** Petzel, 537 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467. Opens Dec. 19. **JOEL SHAPIRO:** PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-989-4258. Through Jan. 19. **JIM SHAW:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through Jan. 25.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

TOM BURR/WALTER PFEIFFER
The eroticism of space and architecture are explored in this joint exhibition, which marries Burr's riffs on minimalist sculpture with Pfeiffer's photographs. Pants, dress shirts, and socks have been draped over bits of unfinished furniture in the sculptural contribution, which Burr conceived, in different form, for an uninhabited unit in a Le Corbusier-designed apartment building in France. Pfeiffer's pictures introduce faces into the mix: short-haired lads mugging for the camera. Viewed together, the projects conjure up the scene of a cheeky kept boy, hanging around his sugar daddy's well-appointed apartment. Through Jan. 19. (Swiss Institute, 495 Broadway, at Broome St. 212-925-2035.)

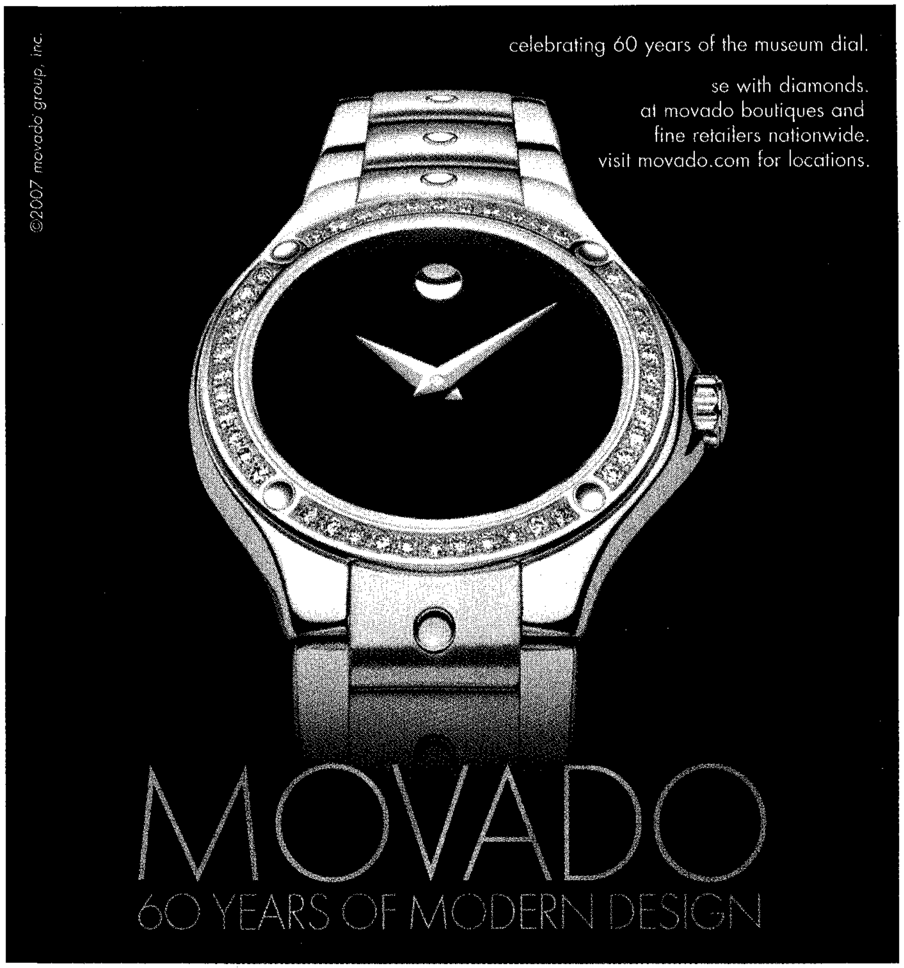
URS FISCHER
New Yorkers were introduced to Fischer's art of destruction in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, when he knocked a gaping hole in an interior wall. This time, he's made a hole in the ground, demolishing the gallery's floor and removing truckloads of dirt. The piece, titled "You," recalls the ghosts of art past: early earthworks and the architectural interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark. Stand in the pit near twisted pipes and loose bricks and you may feel the strictures of the present—Fischer's project, in theory as rebellious as anything by Matta-Clark or Robert Smithson, is politely contained within the protective confines of the white cube. Through Dec. 21. (Brown, 620 Greenwich St. 212-627-5258.)

Short List

PAUL MCCARTHY: Maccarone, 630 Greenwich St. 212-431-4977. Through Dec. 24. **DO HO SUH:** Lehmann Maupin, 201 Chrystie St. 212-254-0054. Through Feb. 2.

GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

DEVON DIKEOU
Conceptual art meets self-disclosure. Rather than hide a potentially embarrassing devotion to a childhood security blanket, nicknamed Niney, Dikeou makes it the subject of her work. "The Niney Chronicles" unfolds in a series of photographs and hilarious text paintings. As the nar-



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HOLIDAY HOURS The Museum opens one hour early from December 26 to 31 and is open New Year's Day.

Georges Seurat. Pierrot and Colombine. c. 1887-88. Conté crayon on paper. The Kasama Nichido Museum of Art

GEORGES SEURAT: THE DRAWINGS is made possible by The Starr Foundation. The Museum acknowledges a generous grant from the Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Charitable Trust. Major support is provided by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Additional funding is provided by Susan G. Jacoby, The Norman and Rosita Winston Foundation, and Cultural Services, Embassy of France in the United States.

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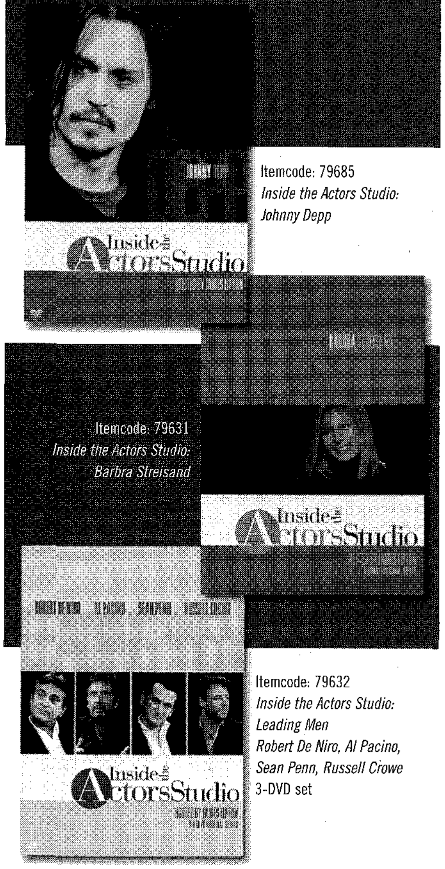

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rative twists and turns (Niney is nearly lost on a shuttle bus from LaGuardia to J.F.K.!), Dikeou's homage to her sacred scrap of wool points, with absurdist levity, to the mysteries of our attachment to objects—and that includes art. Through Feb. 10. (Art Moving Projects, 165 N. 12th St. 917-301-6680.)

"INFINITU ET CONTINI"
The full title of this fifteen-artist video show is a doozy—"Infinitu et Contini: Repeated Histories/Reinvented Resistances"—but then so is the concept: the corrupting seduction of violence. Jim Finn screens a scathing satire about young "guerrillistas," dramatizing rituals of indoctrination and self-criticism related to Peru's Shining Path movement. Martiza Molina presents a young warrior of indeterminate gender, nationality, and era (played by the artist herself) wildly stabbing at the sky, as if trying to murder the sun. Best of all is "Cocked," Matthew Suib's montage of closeups from classic Westerns. Cutting from squinting gunmen to loaded holsters (and adjacent crotches), it's a deadpan deconstruction of the showdown. Through Dec. 30. (Smack Mellon, 92 Plymouth St. 718-834-8761.)

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
George Balanchine's "Nutcracker," from 1954, with its magically growing tree and adorable angels, concludes its run. (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Dec. 18, Dec. 20, and Dec. 27 at 6, Dec. 19 and Dec. 26 at 2 and 6, Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 8, Dec. 22 and Dec. 29 at 2 and 8, Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 at 1 and 5, and Dec. 24 at 2. Through Feb. 24.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE
The company of peerless dancers wraps up its City Center season with a repertory that includes Maurice Béjart's "Firebird," Twyla Tharp's "The Golden Section," and Ailey's "Revelations." (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 18 and Dec. 31 at 7, Dec. 19-21 and Dec. 26-28 at 8, Dec. 22 and Dec. 29 at 2 and 8, and Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 at 3 and 7:30.)

"TANGO FIRE"
Estampas Porteñas, an ensemble from Buenos Aires that's led by the former ballerina Carolina Soler, has performed this tango revue around the world, and at Town Hall last year. In it, five couples, a singer, and a tight quartet of musicians take turns in a program divided into a more casual, dance-hall section (as if in a *milonga*, a tango party) and a stagier second half. Both the music and the choreography move from traditional to contemporary, dragging out warhorses like "La Cumparsita" and finishing up with Astor Piazzolla songs and big lifts. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 18-19 at 7:30, Dec. 20-21 and Dec. 27-28 at 8, Dec. 22 and Dec. 29 at 2 and 8, and Dec. 23, Dec. 26, and Dec. 30 at 2 and 7:30. Through Jan. 6.)

"HOLIDAY WONDERS"
The variety pageant presented by the New York-based New Tang Dynasty TV corporation is a compelling, bizarre East-West mix. A prettified, folkloric rendering of a Mongolian bowl dance or a polemical fable about the persecution of the Falun Gong sect might follow an excerpt from "The Nutcracker," an *erhu* tune, or a Chinese fan dance on a Christmas theme. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 212-307-4111. Dec. 18-21 and Dec. 26 at 7:30, Dec. 22 at 1:30 and 7:30, and Dec. 23-25 at 4.)

NEW SHANGHAI CIRCUS
The Chinese acrobatic troupe continues its run. (New Victory, 209 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Dec. 19, Dec. 22, Dec. 26, and Dec. 29 at 2 and 7, Dec. 20-21 and Dec. 27-28 at 7, and Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 at noon and 5. Through Jan. 6.)

FULL CIRCLE
The well-respected hip-hop couple Rokafella (Anita Garcia) and Kwikstep (Gabriel Dionisio) look back at their own crossings from street to stage in the autobiographical "Innaviews." The duet, which has been refined since a work-in-progress performance last year, weaves together monologues and dance to expose the difficulties of keeping it real in the entertainment business, while poking fun at uncomprehending journalists and graduate students. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Dec. 19-22 at 7:30.)

"UNCIVIL WARS"
David Gordon, whose recent adaptations of Shakespeare and Ionesco have been smart and timely, takes on Bertolt Brecht's anti-Nazi parable "The Roundheads and the Pointheads." Michael Feingold's translation of the play gets mixed with Brecht's essays on playwriting, Hanns Eisler's thoughts on composing, Brecht's and Eisler's songs, and Gordon's movement. The cast includes Valda Setterfield, John Kelly, Dean Moss, and the actress Estelle Parsons. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. Dec. 19-22 at 8.)

KINDING SINDAW
The New York-based Filipino dance-and-music ensemble presents the evening-length work "Bembaran," which intertwines two stories centered on the island of Mindanao: one from recent history, a bloody battle in the Philippine-American war; and one from its legendary past, "Darangen," an epic poem of the Maranao people. (La Mama, 74 E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. Dec. 20-22 at 7:30 and Dec. 23 at 2:30 and 7:30.)

NEW YORK THEATRE BALLET
Short and sweet, the chamber company's "Nutcracker" lasts an hour and features children in the roles of mice, angels, and the Russian acrobat. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 212-355-6160. Dec. 22-23 and Dec. 29-30 at 11 A.M., 1, and 3:30.)

NOCHE FLAMENCA
The no-frills flamenco troupe and its extraordinary star, Soledad Barrio, are best experienced in intimate settings. At Joe's Pub, not only are the quarters close but the well-stocked bar supplies an often missing element in the traditional *cuadro flamenco* format. (425 Lafayette St. 212-539-8778. Dec. 27-30 at 7 and 9:30 and Dec. 31 at 7:30 and 10:30.)

"ALL THAT FOSSE"
The Film Society of Lincoln Center pulls a bowler hat down over one eye for a mini-festival of Bob Fosse films in rarely screened studio prints. Fosse's early performances in "Give a Girl a Break" (1953) and "My Sister Eileen" (1955) show an entertainer of surprisingly wholesome charm, and the seeds of a soon-to-be-dominant choreographic style start sprouting in "The Pajama Game" (1957). By "Sweet Charity" (1969), Fosse's first directorial effort, darkness is setting in, along with the flashes of sleazy brilliance that illuminate "Cabaret" (1972), some of "Lenny" (1974) and "All That Jazz" (1979), and his powerful, disturbing final work, "Star 80" (1983). (Walter Reade, 165 W. 65th St. For more information, visit www.filmlinc.com. Dec. 28-Jan. 1.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
In such seminal works as **"Iphigénie en Tauride"** (based on the play by Euripides), Gluck gave voice to the emotions of his immortal characters through music of elegant simplicity and force. But the various elements of Stephen Wadsworth's new production work at cross-purposes, so it's best to just sit back and enjoy the vocal wonders—the lyrical ardor of Paul Groves's Pylade, the heroic heft of Plácido Domingo's Oreste, and the tonal sunset glow of Susan Graham's Iphigénie; Louis Langrée conducts. (Dec. 19 and Dec. 22 at 8. These are the final performances.) ◆ Gounod's **"Roméo et Juliette"** returns for the holidays with the magnetic Anna Netrebko and Joseph Kaiser in the title roles, supported by the

excellent Nathan Gunn and Robert Lloyd; Plácido Domingo. (Dec. 20 at 8.) ♦ With Matthew Polenzani replacing Kaiser and Paul Nadler replacing Domingo. (Dec. 27 at 7:30, with a New Year's Eve gala performance on Dec. 31 at 7.) ♦ Piero Faggioni's production of **"Un Ballo in Maschera"** is hardly a triumph of imagination, but it has always provided a fine platform for the house's better Verdi singers. The latest cast, which doesn't lack for stars, includes Michèle Crider, Stephanie Blythe, Salvatore Licitra, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky; Gianandrea Noseda. (Dec. 21, Dec. 24, and Dec. 29 at 8.) ♦ With Marco Di Felice replacing Hvorostovsky. (Jan. 1 at 8.) ♦ **"War and Peace"** first came to the Met in 2002 as an import from St. Petersburg, and as an opportunity for the débutante Anna Netrebko to show her stuff. Even without a big-name cast, the current mounting still proves itself worthy of the masterpiece that Prokofiev wrenched from Tolstoy's sprawling novel. Under the baton of Valery Gergiev, the Met orchestra, with moaning strings and horns, sounds as though it were reared on kvass and root vegetables; George Tsypin's spare sets make room for the awesome mise en scène. The ensemble cast includes Marina Poplavskaya, Ekaterina Semenchuk, Alexej Markov, and Samuel Ramey. (Dec. 22 at 12:30.) ♦ In the two other December performances, Irina Mataeva and Vasili Ladyuk replace Poplavskaya and Markov and Gianandrea Noseda replaces Gergiev, with Mikhail Kit replacing Ramey in the final performance of the month. (Dec. 26 and Dec. 28 at 7:30.) ♦ Humperdinck's **"Hansel and Gretel"** is a family favorite at the Met during the Christmas holidays, but Richard Jones's new production—which, while not without humor, makes it clear that this piece is about the desperate plight of two starving children—will be closer in sensibility to Tim Burton than to Walt Disney. The formidable cast features Alice Coote and Christine Schäfer in the title roles and Philip Langridge as the Witch; Vladimir Jurowski. (Dec. 24 and Jan. 1 at 1 and Dec. 29 at 1:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

ARTEK: "AMAHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS"

Now that the composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who in his long career epitomized the concept of popular opera, has passed on, perhaps it's appropriate that Artek, one of the city's finer early-music ensembles, will bring its historical touch to a piece that, however sentimental, is undeniably built to last. A real-life mother and son—Barbara Hollinshead and Ned Hollinshead Sieverts—take the leading roles in a semi-staged chamber performance designed for families. (Dec. 30 at 3.) ♦ The group precedes its opera day with "Angels and Shepherds," an evening of vocal and instrumental music by such composers as Schütz, Stradella, Corelli (the "Christmas Concerto"), and Charpentier. (Dec. 29 at 8.) (St. Bartholomew's Church, Park Ave. at 51st St. 212-378-0222.)

AMATO OPERA: "LA BOHÈME"

Puccini's timeless Latin Quarter romance is offered at an appropriately intimate setting, Anthony Amato's charming shoebox theatre in the East Village. (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 212-228-8200. Dec. 22 and Dec. 29 at 7:30, Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 at 2:30, and Dec. 29 at 2, with a New Year's Eve gala performance on Dec. 31 at 7:30.)

HOLIDAY MUSIC

MUSICA SACRA: "MESSIAH"

Handel's glorious oratorio never lacks for advocates at holiday time, but this long-established professional ensemble always offers one of the better renditions, symphonic in scope yet with a Baroque lightness and poise. This year's vocal soloists are Leslie Fagan, David Walker, Rufus Müller, and Benjamin Clements; Kent Tritle conducts. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 19 and Dec. 21 at 8.)

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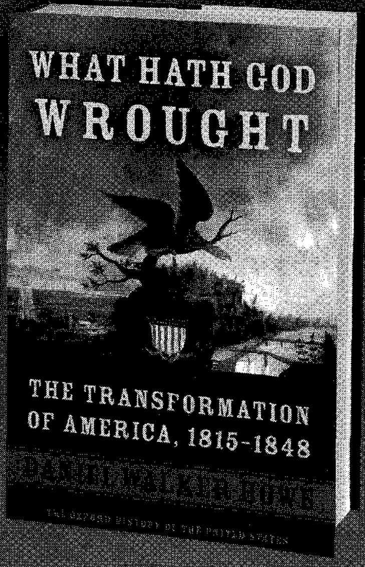

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NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
The city's mighty flagship orchestra also offers a "Messiah" of distinction, which this year will be led by Nicholas McGegan, the conductor of San Francisco's renowned Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra. The impressive vocalists are Celena Shafer, Margaret Lattimore, John Mark Ainsley, and Nathan Berg, backed up by the New York Choral Artists. (Dec. 19-20 at 7:30, Dec. 21 at 2, and Dec. 22 at 8.) ♦ The violinist Joshua Bell will be the special guest at the orchestra's New Year's Eve concert, conducted by Lorin Maazel. (Dec. 31 at 8.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

ST. THOMAS CHOIR
Dec. 20 at 5:30: With the choir's formidable "Messiah" behind it, the boys of the august Anglican ensemble offer a far humbler event—a performance of Britten's magical "Ceremony of Carols," a work (with harp accompaniment) at once sleekly twentieth century and stubbornly medieval. ♦ Dec. 20 at 6:15: John Scott, the group's director and a front-rank organist, returns to perform Messiaen's solo work "La Nativité du Seigneur" on the church's Aeolian-Skinner instrument. (St. Thomas Church, Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. No tickets required.)

EUGENIA ZUKERMAN AND ANTHONY NEWMAN
The flutist and the harpsichordist, longtime colleagues, offer an anecdote-embellished concert of light and gracious music for the holiday season (including "Greensleeves," Pachelbel's "Canon," and Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik"). (St. Bartholomew's Church, Park Ave. at 51st St. 212-378-0248. Dec. 20 at 7:30.)

YOUNG PEOPLE'S CHORUS OF NEW YORK CITY
Francisco J. Núñez's winning ensemble performs its annual "Songs of the Spirit" family concert at the 92nd Street Y, featuring holiday music from around the world. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 22 at 7.)

EARLY MUSIC NEW YORK
Frederick Renz's long-established group offers a new holiday program this year, "A Dutch Christmas," featuring a festive round of sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century carols, Latin motets, and drinking songs for the "Nieuw Jaar." (Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 212-280-0330. Dec. 23 and Dec. 25 at 3 and 8.)

NEW YORK STRING ORCHESTRA
Dec. 24 at 7: The Christmas Eve concert by Carnegie Hall's annual convocation of young virtuosos, led by Jaime Laredo, is all Mozart: the Symphony No. 1 in E-Flat Major, the Piano Concerto No. 22, in the same key (with Yefim Bronfman), and the Symphony No. 35, "Haffner." ♦ Dec. 28 at 8: Wind and brass instruments will abound in the group's surprisingly robust second concert, which features not only an appearance by another piano eminence (André Watts, in Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major) but also the New York première of a work by Richard Danielpour and a performance of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony. (212-247-7800.)

BARGEMUSIC
Brooklyn's floating chamber-music series is particularly cozy at Christmastime; Bach, of course, is in the air. Dec. 24 at 8: Steven Beck, the barge's virtual house pianist, offers an intimate way to spend Christmas Eve—with the hour-long Goldberg Variations, leaving plenty of time to scoot off to midnight Mass. Enjoy the eggnog on your way out. ♦ Dec. 31 at 7:30: New Year's Eve is dedicated to the Brandenburg Concertos—except the capaciously scored First, for which the Concerto for Violin and Oboe is substituted. The audience can join the musicians (who include the violinists Mark Peskanov, Colin Jacobsen, and Lily Francis, the cellist Edward Arron, and the oboist Rita Mitsel) in a champagne toast. (Fulton Ferry Landing. 718-624-2083. For full listing, see www.bargemusic.org.)

LOS ANGELES GUITAR QUARTET
The 92nd Street Y, not to be left out of the New Year's celebrations, presents a concert by the country's leading guitar ensemble. The program reveals the musicians' predilection for ambitious arrangements (of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 and of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol"), along with their love of Brazilian music (by Jobim, Villa-Lobos, and Baden Powell). Champagne included. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 31 at 8.)

RECITALS

"CHAMBER MUSIC AT THE Y"
Leon Fleisher, America's reigning gentleman of the keyboard, joins his pianist wife, Katherine Jacobson Fleisher, and an impressive group of friends (including the hornist David Jolley) for a concert of music by Schumann (featuring the rarely performed Andante and Variations for pairs of pianos and cellos with horn) and Brahms (the eloquent Horn Trio). (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 18-19 at 8.)

PAULINE OLIVEROS
Several experimental-music concerts will provide a counterpoint to the usual holiday cheer. The iconoclastic American composer-accordionist joins the colleagues of her Riverbottom Brainwave Band (on ukelin and banjo) for two concerts of improvisations in which video and audio processing will be controlled by the musicians' brain waves via a homemade EEG machine. (Emily Harvey Foundation, 537 Broadway. Dec. 19 at 7 and 9. For information, see www.deeplistening.org.)

ISSUE PROJECT ROOM
Tony Conrad, one of the original adventurers of musical minimalism, joins a talented young colleague, C. Spencer Yeh, for an electronic improvisatory concert at the Gowanus performance space which will feature such collaborators as the guitarist Sam Goldberg and what is probably Cleveland's only standing "drone trio," Emeralds. (232 Third St., Brooklyn. 718-330-0313. Dec. 20 at 8.)

S.E.M. ENSEMBLE
Petr Kotik's long-established, forward-looking contemporary group places an aria by Bach ("Er hat uns allen wohl getan") on a program of new works by Kotik and Alex Mincek and the monumental Symphony No. 5 ("Amen") by the great Russian maverick Galina Ustvolskaya. (Paula Cooper Gallery, 521 W. 21st St. 718-488-7659. Dec. 20 at 8.)

"IN THE HOUSE OF ETHEL: SOLSTICE"
The vital and brilliant avant-garde string quartet offers a winter-solstice concert at the World Financial Center's Winter Garden in which the musicians' original music will be accompanied by a squad of downtown's best piano talent (Stephen Gosling, Rob Schwimmer, Raja Rahman, and Kathleen Supové). (200 Vesey St. Dec. 21 at 12:30 and 7. No tickets required.)

MOVIES OPENING

ALIEN VS. PREDATOR: REQUIEM
Colin Strause and Greg Strause directed this science-fiction movie, about a small town that is invaded by warring creatures from outer space. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

THE BUCKET LIST
A comedy, directed by Rob Reiner, about two terminally ill men (Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman) who flee a hospital and take to the road. Opening Dec. 25. (In limited release.)

CASSANDRA'S DREAM
A drama by Woody Allen, set in London, about two brothers (Ewan McGregor and Colin Farrell) who, in the face of financial trouble, turn to crime. Opening Dec. 28. (In limited release.)

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 21. (In wide release.)

CHUCK CLOSE
Marion Cajori directed this documentary portrait of the artist. Opening Dec. 26. (Film Forum.)

FLAKES
A romantic comedy involving the owner of a cereal bar (Aaron Stanford) and a clothing designer (Zooey Deschanel). Directed by Michael Lehmann. Opening Dec. 19. (IFC Center.)

THE GREAT DEBATERS
Denzel Washington directed and stars in this drama, based on a true story and set in 1935, about a professor at a historically black university who inspires his debate team to compete nationally. Co-starring Forest Whitaker. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

HONEYDRIPPER
John Sayles directed this drama, about the owner of a juke joint that is imperilled when the ace guitarist of its house band goes missing. Starring Charles S. Dutton, Vondie Curtis-Hall, and Danny Glover. Opening Dec. 28. (Cinema Village.)

IMAGINARY WITNESS: HOLLYWOOD AND THE HOLOCAUST
A documentary, by Daniel Anker, about the representation of the Holocaust in American movies. Opening Dec. 25. (IFC Center.)

NATIONAL TREASURE: BOOK OF SECRETS
In this action sequel, directed by Jon Turteltaub, a treasure hunter (Nicolas Cage) seeks to investigate the killing of Abraham Lincoln through a quest for John Wilkes Booth's diary. Co-starring Jon Voight, Helen Mirren, and Harvey Keitel. Opening Dec. 21. (In wide release.)

THE ORPHANAGE
A horror movie, directed by Juan Antonio Bayona, about a woman who turns her house, which turns out to be haunted, into an orphanage. In Spanish. Opening Dec. 28. (In wide release.)

P.S., I LOVE YOU
Richard LaGravenese wrote and directed this romantic drama, about a widow (Hilary Swank) who finds messages left for her by her late husband (Gerard Butler). Opening Dec. 21. (In wide release.)

PERSEPOLIS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 25. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

SMILEY FACE
Gregg Araki wrote and directed this comedy, about a teen-age stoner (Anna Faris) who gets involved in strange adventures after eating some unusual cupcakes. Opening Dec. 26. (IFC Center.)

STEEP
A documentary about extreme skiing, directed by Mark Obenhaus. Opening Dec. 21. (In wide release.)

SWEENEY TODD
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 21. (In limited release.)

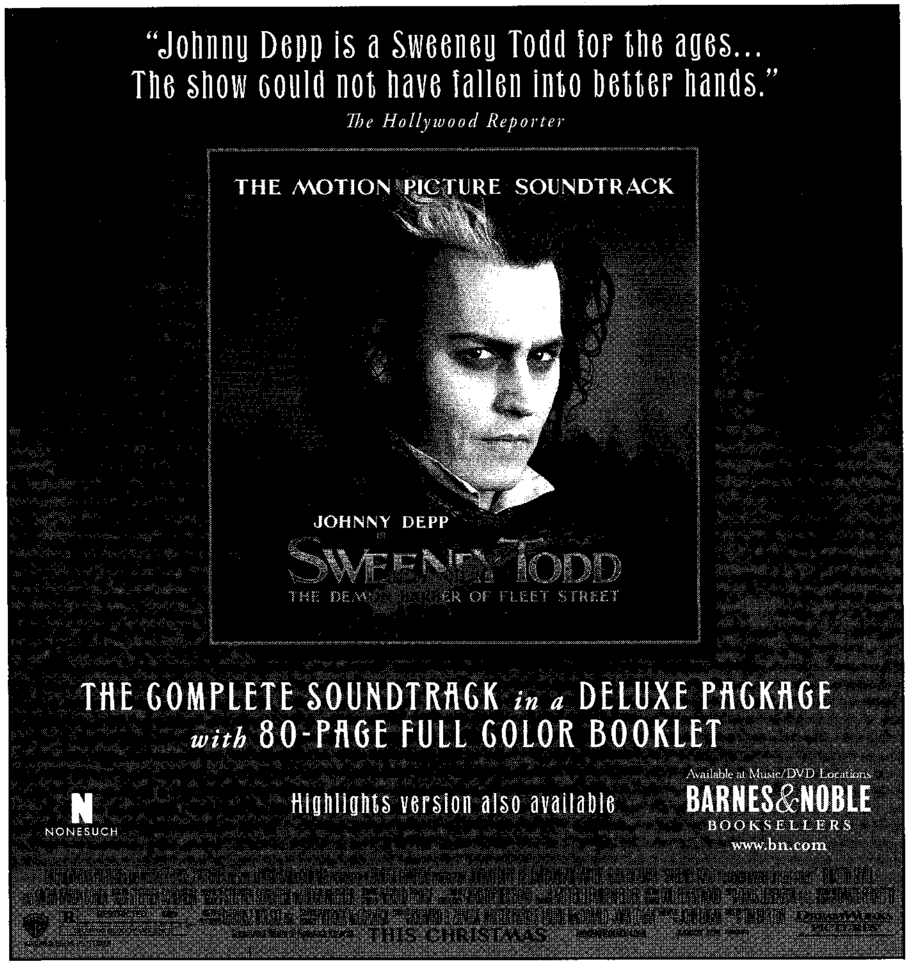
THERE WILL BE BLOOD
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Dec. 26. (In limited release.)

WALK HARD: THE DEWEY COX STORY
A comedy, written by Judd Apatow and Jake Kasdan and directed by Kasdan, about a country singer's rise to success. Starring John C. Reilly and Jenna Fischer. Opening Dec. 21. (In wide release.)

THE WATER HORSE: LEGEND OF THE DEEP
A fantasy, directed by Jay Russell, about a boy who searches for an egg from which he believes a sea creature will emerge. Starring Alex Etel, Emily Watson, and Ben Chaplin. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

ATONEMENT
A very British affair, not just in its personnel—the director Joe Wright and the screenwriter Christopher Hampton serve up a loyal adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel—but in its obsession with the upheavals of the Second World War and with the minor, eternal skirmishes over social class. In 1935, a bright girl named Briony Tallis (Saoirse Ronan) intervenes in—and thus, unwittingly, all but destroys—a passionate rapport between her sister Cecilia (Keira Knightley) and Robbie (James McAvoy), the housekeeper's son. The movie's middle section finds Robbie serving in France during the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chaotic retreat from Dunkirk in 1940 while his beloved waits in London and Briony (now played by Romola Garai) ponders her childhood crime. Wright handles the loops and leaps of time with deftness and clarity, and the film, brimming with sensual detail, certainly honors McEwan's depiction of one hot, cruel day that unfolded into a lifetime of guilt and expiation; but clever books have a troubling habit of coming across, onscreen, as too clever by half, and, somewhere in the labyrinth of its construction, this love story loses its heart. With a wonderful turn, late in the day, by Vanessa Redgrave, as the final incarnation of Briony.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/10/07.) (In wide release.)

BEFORE THE DEVIL KNOWS YOU'RE DEAD

In Sidney Lumet's furious and entertaining little morality play, two men hard up for cash—Andy (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a payroll manager at a Manhattan real-estate company, and his not very bright kid brother, Hank (Ethan Hawke)—decide to knock over their parents' jewelry store in Westchester, and everything goes wrong. The movie, written by Kelly Masterson, has an unusual construction: it reaches a climactic moment, then jumps back a few days to lay out the story from the point of view of one character or another. The fractured time scheme brings out the unsurprising but still enlightening lesson that crime should be left to the professionals, and that greed humbles smart-asses like Andy, who think they're invulnerable. If the material had been underplayed, or done as cool, sly satire, its moral and psychological patterns would have seemed obvious and trite. But the excitable Lumet, now eighty-three, pitches the performances as high as he can, and this feels right. He's made an old man's malicious joke about the universality of folly. With Albert Finney as the boys' frightening dad.—*David Denby* (10/29/07) (In wide release.)

THE DIVING BELL AND THE BUTTERFLY

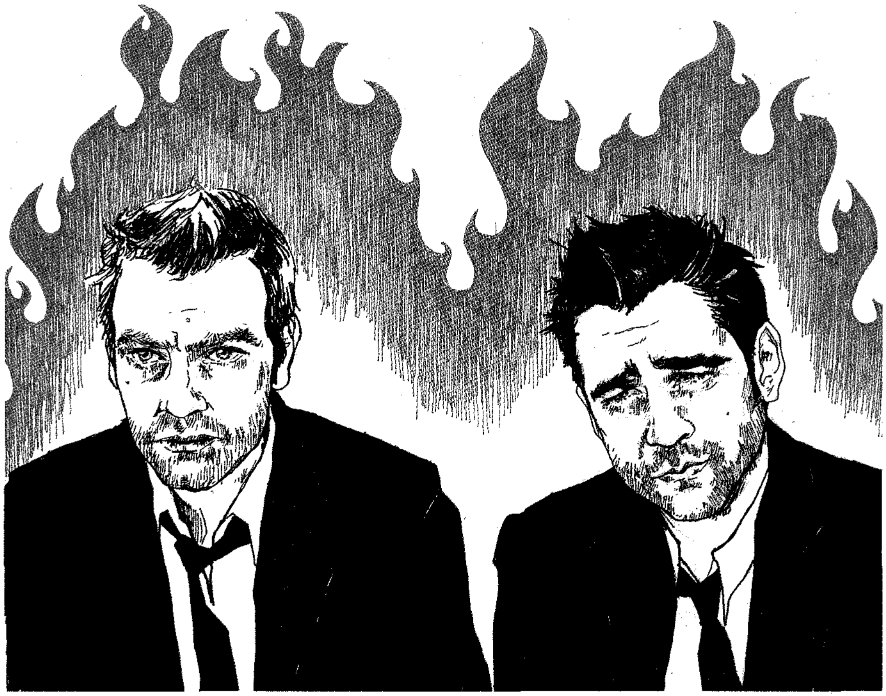
In 1995, Jean-Dominique Bauby, the editor of French *Elle*, suffered, at the age of forty-three, a massive stroke that left him able to move nothing but his left eye. The short book that Bauby composed by blinking while a secretary ran through the alphabet serves as the basis for this astounding movie, which was directed by Julian Schnabel and written by Ronald Harwood. At first, we see only what Bauby (Mathieu Amalric) sees: a blur of faces, which turn out to be the doctors and nurses at the hospital, who float into view in fearsome closeup, like deep-sea monsters. Consciousness arrives, and we experience the discomforts of Bauby's treatment. But then, by degrees, the movie opens up to the great world: Bauby's life and past, his fantasies and dreams. The associations are wild and free, yet nothing feels arbitrary or showy. (One thinks of the visionary episodes in silent films rather than of Fellini.) We need this free-flowing beauty; we deserve it; the movie, in the end, is an overwhelming sensual experience. With Emmanuelle Seigner, Olatz Lopez Garmendia, and Marie-Josée Croze. In French.—*D.D.* (12/3/07) (In wide release.)

ENCHANTED

Disney fights back. After years of seeing its animated features outclassed by the competition—not least by Pixar, now its own subsidiary—the company has realized that its strength lies in plundering its back catalogue and making sport with the spoils. Hence Kevin Lima's new film, which starts in a cartoon kingdom (an unabashed homage to early Disney, exploding with anthropomorphism) and suddenly spirits its main characters into the real world—or, at any rate, into a New York where people sing on cue, and where a divorce lawyer (Patrick Dempsey) can discover his inner warmth. So, not that real. But the conceit is smartly wrought, so much so that the attempts at comic relief (from a C.G.I. chipmunk and a henchman played by Timothy Spall) seem not just lumpen but superfluous. Happily, the leads carry the day: James Marsden as a prince of grinning vanity, Susan Sarandon as the wicked stepmother (although the climax turns her into something else, again unnecessarily), and, above all, Amy Adams, who, in the role of a would-be princess, finds true momentum, not just sappiness, in the farce of innocence. With songs by Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz.—*A.L.* (In wide release.)

THE GOLDEN COMPASS

An earnest and unsatisfying adaptation of the first book in Philip Pullman's best-selling young-adult fantasy trilogy, "His Dark Materials." The adventure takes place in a land where people's souls manifest themselves as animals and the sinister government of the Magisterium wants to rule the world. The story involves a young orphan girl (Dakota Blue Richards) who, with the aid of a magic compass, sets out to find two friends who have been kidnapped by the Magisterium. At the same time, she is befriended by a glamorous world traveller (Nicole Kidman), who promises to help her on her quest but has her own agenda. The movie, directed by Chris Weitz, is stuffed with subplots and characters (talking animals, witches, and water gypsies) who all have a story to tell, and the narrative becomes so busy that the plot gets lost. With its soaring Roman structures, vehicles out of Jules Verne, and Dickensian Cockney dialogue, Weitz gets the look and the feel right, but the magic stops there. And the unresolved ending is a huge problem, particularly if the audience hasn't been told that the film is basically a setup for things to come.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)



Ewan McGregor and Colin Farrell in Woody Allen's drama "Cassandra's Dream."

HOPE GANGLOFF

I AM LEGEND

In 1973, when "Day of the Dolphin" opened, Pauline Kael wrote that it was "the most expensive Rin Tin Tin picture ever made." Alas, this is no longer true. Will Smith's movie cost two hundred million dollars, and he spends almost the entire two hours talking to a German shepherd. Man and dog are apparently the only fully human and fully canine survivors after an anti-cancer serum has killed everyone else in the world except for some rabid humanoids and devil dogs. The digitized shots of an empty New York, with grass sprouting between the cracks in the pavement, are intriguing to look at, but the rest of the movie is a violent retread of older last-man-on-earth films with Vincent Price, Charlton Heston, and Don Johnson. The religious will be relieved to know that God is explicitly not responsible for eliminating the earth's population. The villain is science. Directed by a badly overmatched Francis Lawrence.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

I'M NOT THERE

On the principle that the range and mutability of Bob Dylan's music defy classification, and that his own character has been an amalgam of selves, this new Todd Haynes movie assigns six separate actors—Marcus Carl Franklin, Ben Whishaw, Heath Ledger, Christian Bale, Richard Gere, and Cate Blanchett—to play variations, as it were, on the theme of being Dylan. Of the six, only the first and last make an enduring impact—Franklin with his smile and brio, Blanchett with the audacity of her transformation into a curly-haired, mumbling male sage. The other performers are smothered by the central conceit, which may well exasperate aficionados while baffling the unconverted; the real Dylan is never spoken of, and his songs have to fight for space amid the mythmaking and speculation. In particular, the section with Gere, who moseys around a doomed Western town in the role of Billy the Kid, feels richly redundant to the project. Haynes's fans, at least, will be gratified to find his command of light and color undiminished. With Bruce Greenwood in fine form as a quizzical journalist.—*A.L.* (11/26/07) (In wide release.)

JUNO

The terrific comedy writer Diablo Cody, working with the director Jason Reitman, has fashioned this lovely little movie entirely from the point of view of a teen-age girl. Juno (Ellen Page) finds herself in a terrible fix—she's pregnant at sixteen—and her initial reaction to her overwhelming new situation is to treat it with the same flip, pop-cult school-locker sarcasm that she uses for everything else. She decides to carry the baby to term and finds what seems like an ideal yuppie couple (Jason Bateman and Jennifer Garner) to adopt it, but everything falls apart. Where are love and constancy to be found? Reitman stages Juno's crisis with great gentleness, and enfolds it into a witty and playful formal frame: the narrative progresses through the seasons, starting in autumn, with the first three seasons corresponding to Juno's trimesters. Kimya Dawson's plaintively funny little songs provide additional punctuation, as do recurrent groups of runners from Juno's high school, including Paul (Michael Cera), whose golden shorts reveal his best feature (according to Juno), his slender long legs. The writing throughout is both delicate and sharp. With

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SILENT NIGHTS

A long string of confetti is mistaken for spaghetti and gets eaten. A piece of soap, taken for cheese, is placed on bread and also is consumed. A man trying to commit suicide ties one end of a rope around a heavy rock but accidentally slips the noose at the other end around the neck of a friend, and then heaves the rock into the water. "City Lights," Charlie Chaplin's "comedy romance in pantomime," from 1931, is about the hapless transfer of objects in an unstable and dangerous world. Chaplin's Tramp is befriended by a drunken plutocrat at night and then thrown into the gutter by the same man the next morning, when he's sober. The tramp escapes this nightmare by way of a loving and protective friendship with a blind flower girl. Chaplin makes jokes about blindness, but no one could argue with his tact. When the girl (Virginia Cherrill) recovers her sight, the suspense becomes unbearable: will she accept the shabby tramp as her cavalier? Film Forum screens a new 35-mm. print Dec. 25-Jan. 1, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Chaplin's death.

KIM DEMARCO

—*David Denby*

Allison Janney and J. K. Simmons.—*D.D.* (12/17/07) (In limited release.)

THE KITE RUNNER
An Afghan émigré to California, Amir (Khalid Abdalla), gets the chance to redeem himself after betraying, years ago, in Kabul, a servant boy who grew up in his household. Amir's salvation is a rescue operation that requires him to go back to Afghanistan, now dominated by the Taliban. Shame is rarely an active emotion, and that may account, in part, for the movie's slight stiffness and hesitancy. In addition, the director, Marc Forster, a Swiss-German, is working with Afghan and Iranian actors, and the differences in language seem to have eliminated speed and colloquial ease—the dialogue is well written, but there's a bit of dead air around the lines. The best things in the movie are the portrait of Kabul's flourishing upper-class life before the Soviets and then the Taliban took over, and also the bleak hypocrisies of the Taliban period—the disgusting cruelties performed in the name of righteousness and the madness that makes it an offense to look at a woman's face but acceptable to keep a young boy in sexual servitude. With the wonderful Homayoun Ershadi as Baba, Amir's dauntless but fallible father. Adapted by David Benioff from the international best-seller by Khaled Hosseini.—*D.D.* (12/17/07) (In limited release.)

THE LAVENDER HILL MOB
As the prim, innocuous civil servant with a hidden spark of nonconformity, Alec Guinness carries out a dream of larcenous glory: robbing the Bank of England. A man who steals three million pounds in gold bullion may be permitted to coin a word: Guinness describes his gleaming-eyed, bowler-hatted little man as the "fubsy" type, and he's an image of Everyman. T.E.B. Clarke's script, Charles Crichton's direction, and Georges Auric's music contribute to what is probably the most nearly perfect fubsy comedy of all time. It's a minor classic, a charmer. Stanley Holloway is the genteel, artistic accomplice, Alfie Bass and Sidney James are the professional assistants, and one of the beneficiaries of Guinness's wrongdoing is a bit player, Audrey Hepburn. Released in 1951.—*Pauline Kael* (Thalia; Dec. 23 and Dec. 25.)

THE MIST
It takes nerve, and a certain style, for the director of "The Shawshank Redemption" to make a horror film in which almost nothing is redeemable, but that is what Frank Darabont has done. A small town in Maine is invaded by thick mist, under cover of which lurk misshapen creatures—the outcome, we vaguely learn, of wayward military experiments. As if determined to stock up on groceries, they lay siege to a supermarket, where a crowd of locals has found refuge. These include some reassuringly familiar types, such as the heroic pragmatist (Thomas Jane), the consoling schoolteacher (Laurie Holden), the finger-pointing nutcase (Marcia Gay Harden), and the skeptic (Andre Braugher) who refuses to believe in giant, writhing flesh-eaters right up to the moment at which he meets them socially. The result, adapted from a story by Stephen King, is well paced, and blood is shed in careful moderation, but do not be fooled by the anguish of the climax: this is the true, B-movie mixture of shocks and silliness, and is all the better for it.—*A.L.* (11/26/07) (In wide release.)

NANKING
An exceptionally well-knit documentary about the horrifying events that took place in Nanking between December, 1937, and March, 1938, when the Japanese Army fell upon the city, then the capital of China, and slaughtered as many as three hundred thousand soldiers and civilians and raped twenty thousand women. Directed by Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman, and produced by the AOL executive Theodore J. Leonsis, the movie integrates two kinds of material—letters and journals written mainly by Western observers of the events and read by actors (including Woody Harrelson and Mariel Hemingway) sitting in a rehearsal room, and historical footage of the bombardment and slaughter. It's very likely that the anguish of a city helplessly besieged by a marauding army hasn't been conveyed with comparable power since the Greek tragedies that were told from the Trojan point of view. The movie lays special emphasis on the heroic and largely forgotten efforts of Americans and Germans in Nanking to protect as many citizens as they could.—*D.D.* (Film Forum.)

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN
The latest movie by the Coen brothers is adapted from Cormac McCarthy's novel of the same name. Javier Bardem, his menace half-masked by a comical haircut, plays a calm, unstoppable psychopath on the trail of a stolen two million dollars. (His presence is both frightening and entertaining, if never wholly credible.) Various unfortunates cross his path and suffer the consequences, but his principal target is Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin), a passing hunter who took the money. Following them both is Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), who seems in no particular hurry, and whose ruminations on crimes past and present committed in this desolate part of Texas are spoken in a gravelly voice-over. The movie, photographed by Roger Deakins, is almost stately in its ominous control, drawing us into the minutiae of mayhem and revenge. What other filmmakers would devote an extended scene to the stashing of booty in a ventilation shaft? The result is oddly unemotional, as if a vicious game were being played by solemn rules, with barely a flicker of interest in the characters' moral plight. Only Kelly Macdonald, in her beautifully judged (and accented) performance as Moss's wife, begins to restore the balance. With Woody Harrelson.—*A.L.* (11/12/07) (In wide release.)

OPENING NIGHT
Myrtle Gordon (Gena Rowlands), a glorious actress in the prime of life, stars in a new play by an elder writer (Joan Blondell) but finds that the part—which is all about aging—forces her to play old, think old, seem old, and become old, and she resists ferociously, onstage, in real time. The psychodramatic improvisations that she wreaks upon the text, and the chaos they sow among her colleagues onstage and off, are the crux of John Cassavetes's harrowing and profound film, from 1977. Gordon's co-star (Cassavetes), her director (Ben Gazzara), the producer (Paul Stewart), the playwright, and the entire crew get drawn into the vortex of her turmoil as she turns the theatre into the arena of her existential combat. The story begins with the magic moment when Myrtle passes from the wings to the stage, and Cassavetes quickly proves that she never stops being herself. The familiar fascination of backstage melodrama keeps the action flowing even when the terrifying, self-excoriating antics threaten to rend the fabric of the drama or even burst through the screen. Cassavetes's most cleverly constructed film is also his most furiously, dangerously passionate work; it is also a definitive lesson in the death-defying, all-consuming art of acting, proof of the madness of his Method.—*Richard Brody* (MOMA; Dec. 29 and Dec. 31.)

THE PAJAMA GAME
Simply one of the greatest musicals. The hard-nosed Sid Sorokin (John Raitt) blows into town from Chicago and talks his way into a job as foreman at a pajama factory, where the owner is cooking the books to keep from giving his workers a raise of seven and a half cents per hour. He locks horns with the chief of the union's grievance committee, Babe Williams (Doris Day), and the sparks that fly aren't all business. The directors, Stanley Donen and George Abbott, bring the unusually realistic action to life with bold and graceful camera moves, imaginative staging, and a sure eye for typecasting; Bob Fosse's agile, angular choreography has the graphic appeal of modernist typography in motion; and the supporting cast offers a few star turns, by Eddie Foy, Jr., doing the old soft-shoe, and, in her only movie role, the strange, spunky, and wildly spontaneous Carol Haney (who died young), camping and vamping with abandon. The iconic songs include "Hernando's Hideaway," "Steam Heat" (with an appropriately torrid Fosse number), "Hey There" (featuring Raitt in a duet with a Dictaphone), and, above all,

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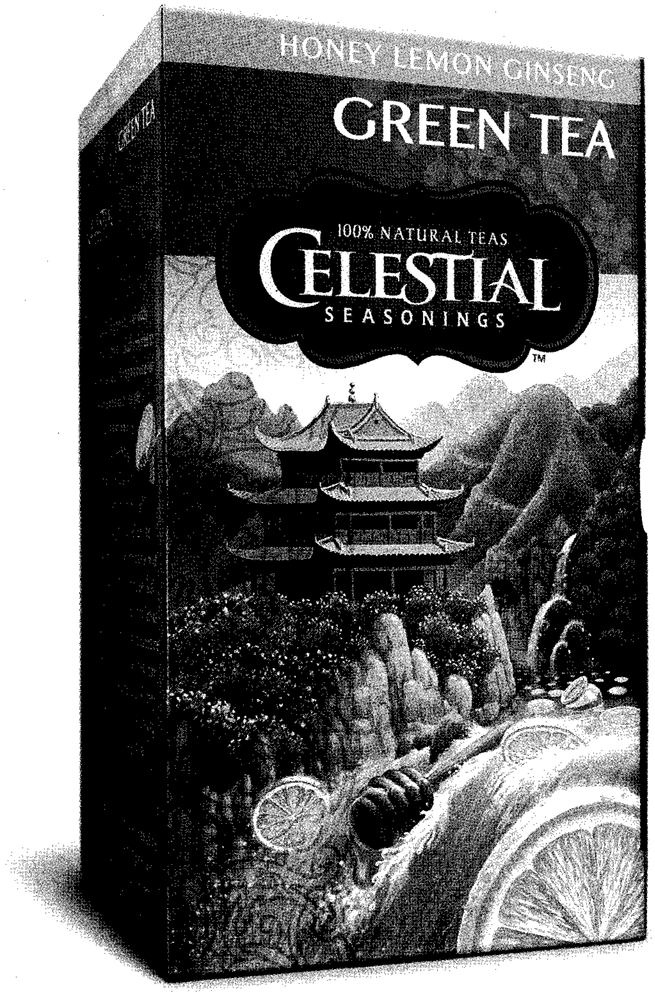
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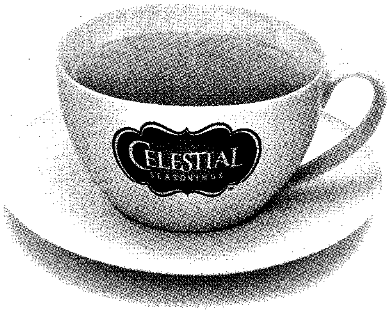
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"There Once Was a Man," a love song done as a foot-stomping, high-stepping hee-haw, one of the cinema's most exuberant examples of over-the-moon romantic ecstasy. Released in 1957.—*R.B.* (Walter Reade; Dec. 29 and Dec. 31.)

THE SAVAGES

A vital, honest, and engaging movie about two fortyish siblings who have never grown up. Philip Seymour Hoffman plays a saturnine literature professor who specializes in the most acidulous of twentieth-century artists, Bertolt Brecht, and Laura Linney is his kid sister, an unproduced playwright who gets by working temp jobs, stealing from office supply rooms, and hustling for grants. Unresolved in everything that matters, brother and sister, to their chagrin, find themselves in charge of their nasty and unreachable father (Philip Bosco), who has never given them any love. The movie, however, is less interested in their relation to him than in their cranky elbowing of each other. Written and directed by Tamara Jenkins, "The Savages" asks whether two people who have never been prized can possibly bring themselves to value anyone else or even themselves. The answer is soberly inspiring.—*D.D.* (12/3/07) (In wide release.)

STARTING OUT IN THE EVENING

As Leonard Schiller, an aging, ailing old-school novelist seemingly born in a suit and tie, Frank Langella gives his all in a hopeless cause. This soporific quasi-literary soap opera finds the writer, a lonely widower, clacking away at a novel on a manual typewriter in a prewar Upper West Side palace when Heather Wolfe (Lauren Ambrose, too perky by half), a grad student, turns up. She wants to write a critical biography of Schiller to rehabilitate his name and his work, and she worms her way into his confidence and, unsurprisingly, his bed, with predictably unhappy results. There's also something about his unfulfilled daughter (Lili Taylor) and her relationship problems, but the story runs on Schiller's embattled rectitude and the fantasy that great writers embody a lost gentility of austere habits too sacred to be sullied by mere carnality. In real life, he would have eaten her up by the end of the first reel. Directed by Andrew Wagner.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

THERE WILL BE BLOOD

This enthralling and powerfully eccentric American epic, written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson (adapting Upton Sinclair's garrulous 1927 novel "Oil!"), covers a thirty-year span in the life of Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis), who begins as a lonely silver miner in 1898 and winds up as one of the richest, and craziest, tycoons in early-twentieth-century California. Much of the first part of the movie is given over to raptly silent passages of physical effort—men lifting, hauling, pounding, working silently in the muck and viscous slime. "Blood" is about the driving force of capitalism as it both creates and destroys the future, and its tone is at once exhilarated and sickened. Day-Lewis lowers his chin slightly, and the dark eyes dance with merriment as he speaks in full, coarse, and rounded tones. It is the voice of dominating commercial logic, an American force of nature. Plainview's great antagonist is a young man, Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), who thinks he has the word of God within him, and who creates, in the oil fields, the revivalist Church of the Third Revelation. Anderson has set up a kind of allegory of development, in which the two overwhelming forces—entrepreneurial capitalism and evangelism—build Southern California together and then, inevitably, fall into combat. Their final confrontation goes as far over the top as one of Plainview's gushing wells. The music, at times distressing or pulse-raising, is by Jonny Greenwood, of Radiohead. The magnificent cinematography is by Robert Elswit.—*D.D.* (12/17/07) (In limited release.)

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Despite the film's trite coming-of-age contours (each calamity teaches a lesson), the director, Elia Kazan, packs an emotional charge into this story of a girl growing up in turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. The staging of his first movie betrays his theatrical origins, but Kazan's sure touch with the cast clarifies the tense bonds of a hardworking, practical wife (Dorothy McGuire), her alcoholic singing-waiter husband (James Dunn), and their daughter (Peggy Ann Garner) and son (Ted Donaldson). Dunn spouts pipe dreams with a lyric desperation, while Garner shows the edgy, sometimes eerie urgency of adolescent hopes and fixations; together they achieve a rough-edged perfection. And the other actors (including Joan Blondell, in the quintessential Blondell role, as McGuire's good-hearted, earthy sister) create an atmosphere of sentiment and striving that fills in for the absence of visual artistry and poetry. The movie may not venture into the unknown, but it doesn't cheat; its square intensity fortifies you like an honest breakfast.—*Michael Sragow* (MOMA; Dec. 19 and Jan 1.)

THE WALKER

Paul Schrader's peculiar Washington, D.C., thriller, another installment of his "night worker" films (including "Taxi Driver," which he wrote, and "American Gigolo"), stars Woody Harrelson as Carter Page, a gay man descended from a long line of respected Southern politicos, who spends his days as a companion to wealthy politicians' wives. When his favorite, Lynn (Kristin Scott Thomas), discovers the murder of a lobbyist she is sleeping with, Carter covers for her and becomes implicated in the crime. Though set in the present day (there are vague references to 9/11 and terrorism), the film seems oddly trapped in the past, which, perhaps, allows for the apt rendering of Washington drawing rooms. The film is graced with some wonderful scene-stealing by the regal, beautiful women, especially Scott Thomas and the wise, iconic Lauren Bacall, and by Ned Beatty as a wily Vice-President. Although Harrelson exudes an appealing cheekiness, he lacks the depth or panache to make us feel anything.—*Shauna Lyon* (In wide release.)

YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH

The worst thing about Francis Ford Coppola's movie is that it isn't outrageous enough to become camp. A seventy-year-old Romanian linguist and polymath, Dominic (Tim Roth), struck by lightning in 1938, undergoes some sort of regenerative process and recovers the body of his forty-year-old self. Years later, in the mountains, he runs into a pretty girl, Veronica (Alexandra Maria Lara), and damned if she doesn't get struck by lightning, too, at which point she turns into his long-dead paramour, now suddenly granted access to languages and civilizations from aeons ago. In the junk movies of the past, women inhabited by someone else's soul spoke in tongues—maybe during sex—but, when Veronica bursts into Sumerian or Sanskrit, Coppola presents it as a revelation of the eternal return of civilization. The material is based on the work of the distinguished Romanian novelist and religious historian Mircea Eliade, but Eliade's ideas may not be amenable to dramatic treatment, and, in this case, they have been handled with appalling solemnity. People sit around discussing time and language; professors with thick accents deliver opinions on arcane subjects; there's a bald swami with a stick, a cave in India with skulls and parchment that turns to dust. Some of the images and period settings are lovely, but Coppola, once the greatest storyteller in movies, has settled for the kind of unworkably pompous nonsense that most people leave behind in a college bull session. With Bruno Ganz.—*D.D.* (Paris and Sunshine Cinema.)

Also Playing

AWAKE: In wide release. **THE DARJEELING LIMITED:** In wide release. **A WALK INTO THE SEA:** Cinema Village.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"New Documentaries from Taiwan." Dec. 20 at 7:30: "Jump! Boys" (2005, Lin Yu-Hsien; in Mandarin and Taiwanese). ♦ Dec. 21 at 7:30: "The Rhythm in Wulu Village" (2006, Wang Chun-Hsiung; in Mandarin and Bunun). ♦ Dec. 22 at 6: "Taipei's Bohemians" (2004, Hung Hung; in Mandarin and Taiwanese). ♦ Dec. 22 at 7:30: "Let It Be: The Last Rice Farmers" (2005, Yen Lan-Chuan and Juang Yi-Tseng; in Mandarin and Taiwanese). ♦ "Essential Cinema." Dec. 21 at 7: "Earth" (1929-30, Alexander Dovzhenko; silent). ♦ Dec. 22 at 5: The films of Joseph Cornell, Program 1. ♦ Dec. 22 at 7: The films of Joseph Cornell, Program 2.

BAM ROSE CINEMAS

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—Special screenings. Dec. 19 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Antonio Gaudí" (1984, Hiroshi Teshigahara; in Japanese and Spanish). ♦ Dec. 20 at 6 and 9: "The Passenger" (1975, Michelangelo Antonioni).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Dec. 19-24 at 1:25, 3:30, 5:35, 7:40, and 9:45: "Hannah and Her Sisters" (1986, Woody Allen). ♦ Dec. 25-Jan. 1 at 1:30, 3:25, 5:20, 7:15, and 9:10: "City Lights" (1931, Charlie Chaplin; silent).

IFC CENTER

323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—In revival. Dec. 19-25 (call for showtimes): "Bad Santa: The Director's Cut" (2003, Terry Zwigoff). ♦ Dec. 19-25 (call for showtimes): "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946, Frank Capra). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." Dec. 21-22: "El Topo" (1970, Alejandro Jodorowsky; in Spanish).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

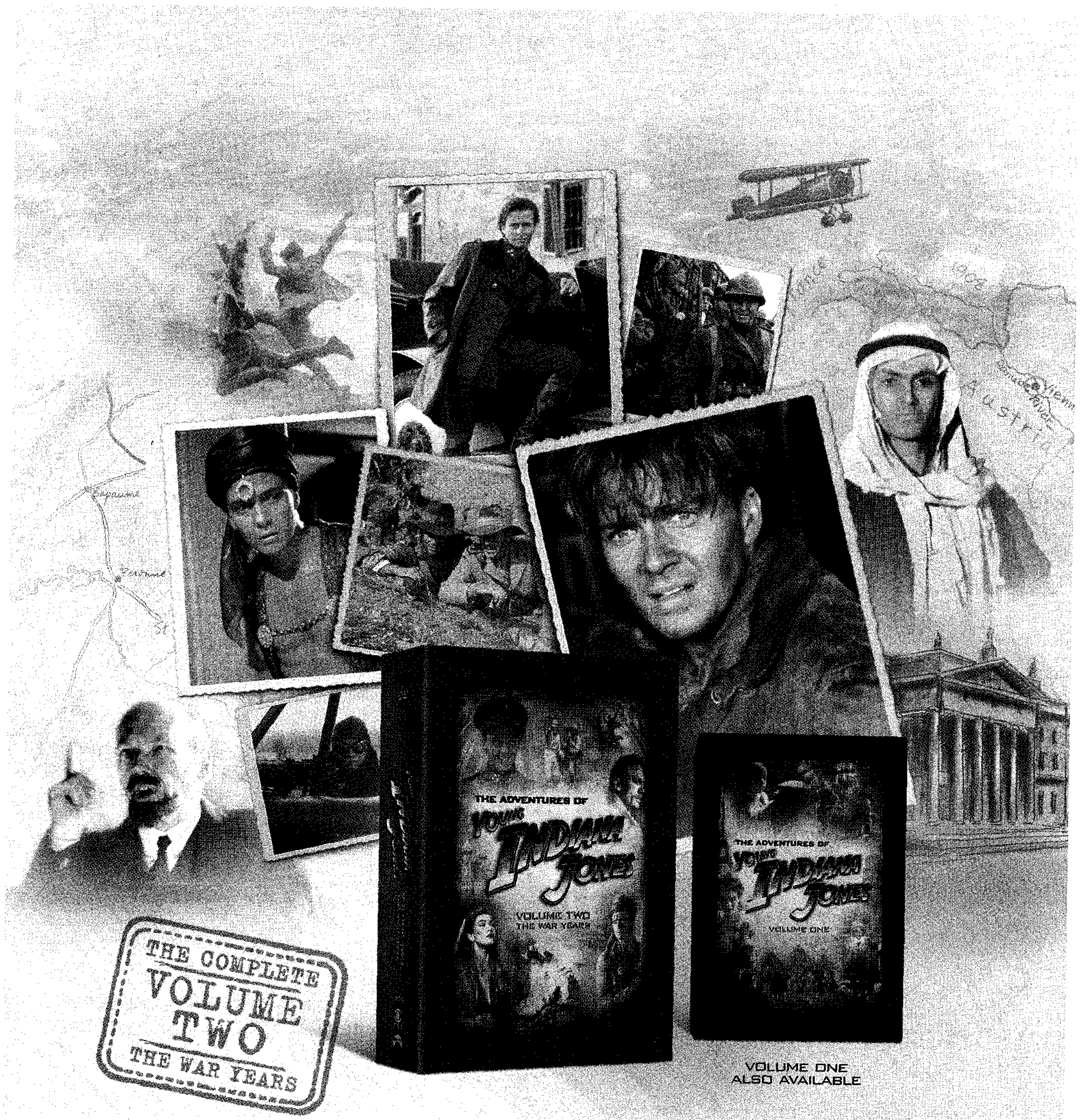
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Still Moving." Dec. 19-21 at 1:30: "Kiki" (1926, Clarence Brown; silent). ♦ Jan. 1 at 2: Three Technicolor Popeye shorts (1936-39, Dave Fleischer). ♦ Jan. 1 at 3:30: "Election" (1999, Alexander Payne). ♦ "Joan Blondell: The Bombshell from Ninety-first Street." Dec. 19 at 6 and Dec. 22 at 2: "Blonde Crazy" (1931, Roy Del Ruth). ♦ Dec. 19 at 8 and Jan. 1 at 2:30: "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" (†). ♦ Dec. 20 at 6 and Dec. 22 at 4: "Blondie Johnson" (1933, Ray Enright). ♦ Dec. 20 at 8 and Dec. 23 at 2: "Nightmare Alley" (1947, Edmund Goulding). ♦ Dec. 21-22 at 6: "Footlight Parade" (1933, Lloyd Bacon). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8:30 and Dec. 23 at 4:30: "The Blue Veil" (1951, Curtis Bernhardt). ♦ Dec. 23 at 4:30 and Dec. 29 at 2: "Night Nurse" (1931, William A. Wellman). ♦ Dec. 26 at 6 and Dec. 29 at 4: "Three on a Match" (1932, Mervyn LeRoy). ♦ Dec. 26 at 7:30 and Dec. 31 at 7:15: "The King and the Chorus Girl" (1937, LeRoy). ♦ Dec. 27 at 6 and Dec. 28 at 8: "There's Always a Woman" (1938, Alexander Hall). ♦ Dec. 27 at 8 and Dec. 30 at 4: "Three Girls About Town" (1941, Leigh Jason). ♦ Dec. 28 at 6 and Dec. 30 at 2: "Lizzie" (1957, Hugo Haas). ♦ Dec. 29 at 5:30 and Dec. 31 at 4:30: "Opening Night" (†). ♦ "Collaborations in the Collection." Dec. 21 at 6: "Gunga Din" (1939, George Stevens). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8:30: "Wuthering Heights" (1939, William Wyler). ♦ The films of Giuseppe De Santis. All films are in Italian. Dec. 27 at 6: "Days of Glory" (1945, De Santis, Luchino Visconti, et al.). ♦ Dec. 27 at 8: "Days of Love" (1954, De Santis and Leopoldo Savona). ♦ Dec. 28 at 6: "Rome 11 O'Clock" (1952). ♦ Dec. 28 at 8:30: "No Peace Under the Olive Trees" (1950). ♦ Dec. 29 at 2: "Bitter Rice" (1949). ♦ Dec. 29 at 4:30: "Giuseppe De Santis" (2007, Carlo Lizzani). ♦ Dec. 30 at 4:30: "A Tragic Hunt" (1946).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"An Evening with Danny Glover." Dec. 19 at 7: The actor will discuss his career with the curator David Schwartz; with remarks by the director John Sayles and a performance by the guitarist Gary Clark, Jr. (Event to be held at the Times Center, 242 W. 41st St., Manhattan. For ticket information, visit www.movingimage.us or call 718-784-4520.) ♦ Special screenings. Dec. 22-30 (call for showtimes): Walt Disney's "Silly Symphonies" (1929-39).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." Dec. 21 at 9:30: "Samsara" (2001, Pan Nalin; in Tibetan and Ladakhi).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Special Features Are Not Rated.

THALIA THEATRE

Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—The films of Alec Guinness. Dec. 23 and Dec. 25 at 6: "The Ladykillers" (1955, Alexander Mackendrick). ♦ Dec. 23 and Dec. 25 at 7:45: "The Lavender Hill Mob" (†). ♦ Dec. 30 and Jan. 1 at 6: "The Man in the White Suit" (1951, Mackendrick). ♦ Dec. 30 and Jan. 1 at 7:45: "Kind Hearts and Coronets" (1949, Robert Hamer).

WALTER READE THEATRE

Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—"Spanish Cinema Now." All films are in Spanish. Dec. 19 at 2 and 6:30: "Gary Cooper, Who Art in Heaven" (1980, Pilar Miró). ♦ Dec. 19 at 4 and 8:45: "Beltenbros" (1992, Miró). ♦ Dec. 20 at 2 and 6:15: "The Education of Fairies" (2006, José Luis Cuerda). ♦ Dec. 21 at 4:15 and 8:45 and Dec. 23 at 7: "Seven Billiard Tables" (2007, Gracia Querejeta). ♦ Dec. 22 at 12:30: "The War on Film," Program 1. ♦ Dec. 22 at 2:40: "The War on Film," Program 2. ♦ Dec. 22 at 5, Dec. 23 at 9:15, and Dec. 27 at 8:30: "Septembers" (2006, Carles Bosch). ♦ Dec. 22 at 7:20 and Dec. 24 at 2 and 6: "Doghead" (2006, Santi Amodeo). ♦ Dec. 23 at 12:30: "The War on Film," Program 3. ♦ Dec. 23 at 2:45: "The War on Film," Program 4. ♦ Dec. 23 at 4:45 and Dec. 27 at 2 and 6:15: "The Dog in the Manger" (1995, Miró). ♦ Dec. 26 at 2 and 6:40: "The Bird of Happiness" (1993, Miró). ♦ Dec. 26 at 4:15 and 9: "Your Name Poisons My Dreams" (1996, Miró). ♦ "All That Fosse." Dec. 28 at 1:30 and 6:15 and Dec. 31 at 8:15: "Cabaret" (1972). ♦ Dec. 28 at 4 and Dec. 30 at 8:15: "Star 80" (1983). ♦ Dec. 28 at 8:45, Dec. 31 at 6, and Jan. 1 at 8:30: "Lenny" (1974). ♦ Dec. 29 at 1 and Dec. 31 at 3:45: "The Pajama Game" (†). ♦ Dec. 29 at 3:10 and Dec. 30 at 5:15: "Sweet Charity" (1969). ♦ Dec. 29 at 6:15 and Dec. 30 at 3:30: "Give a Girl a Break" (1953, Stanley Donen). ♦ Dec. 29 at 8:15, Dec. 30 at 1, and Jan. 1 at 4: "All That Jazz" (1979). ♦ Dec. 31 at 1:30 and Jan. 1 at 6:20: "My Sister Eileen" (1955, Richard Quine).

READINGS AND TALKS

STRAND BOOKSTORE

Annie Bergen, Elliott Forrest, Jeff Spurgeon, and Midge Woolsey, announcers on the classical-music station WQXR, swing by this literary institution on Dec. 18 at 6 for a reading of an adaptation (by their colleague Clayelle Dalferes) of Dickens's "A Christmas Carol." Wine and cheese will be served, the latter provided by Rob Kaufelt, the owner of Murray's Cheese, in Greenwich Village, and the author of "The Murray's Cheese Handbook." (Broadway at 12th St. No tickets necessary.)

KGB BAR

Naomi Novik and Christopher Barzak deliver a night of science fiction. (85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary. Dec. 19 at 7.)

NEW YEAR'S DAY MARATHONS

The Poetry Project kicks off its thirty-fourth annual gathering at 2. More than a hundred and fifty performers, including Philip Glass, Anselm Berrigan, Steve Earle, Eric Bogosian, and Tracie Morris, are expected. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-0910.) Over at the Bowery Poetry Club, also starting at 2, a number of the same folks will participate in a spoken-word spectacle, now in its fourteenth year. (308 Bowery. 212-614-0505.)

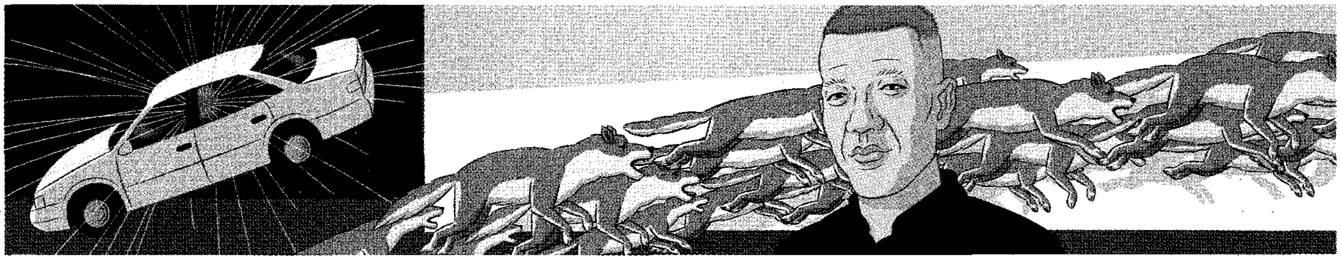
ABOVE AND BEYOND

OH, THE WEATHER OUTSIDE IS FRIGHTFUL

The Coney Island Polar Bear Club, whose motto is "Every day is a beach day," takes its New Year's Day dip in the icy North Atlantic. As was the case last year, the event (which is open to all) is for more than just bragging rights; it benefits Camp Sunshine, a nonprofit retreat in Maine for children with life-threatening illnesses and their families. (Swim time is at 1. For more information, visit www.polarbearclub.org.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

Sotheby's final sale of the year is an offering of Judaica (on Dec. 19), including a gorgeously rendered portrait of a student wearing a sumptuous fur hat ("Portrait of a Yeshiva Boy"), by Isidor Kaufmann. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ **Phillips** wraps things up with a selling exhibit (through Dec. 29) of the futuristic lighting designs of Marcus Tremonto. (450 W. 15th St. 212-940-1200.) ♦ **Swann** ends the year in high style. On Dec. 13, the house offers one of its regular auctions of photographs and photography books, featuring several editions of Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work*, including No. 36 (from 1911), which contains sixteen New York-themed photogravures by Stieglitz himself. The final sale of the year, however, is an appropriately decadent pre-Christmas offering of Art Nouveau posters (Dec. 19); among the highlights is "Ilsée Princesse de Tripoli," a collection of a hundred and thirty-eight hand-colored proofs by the elegant Czech master Alphonse Mucha, the Norman Rockwell of the Belle Époque. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)



MICHAEL WELDON

The Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, at the Guggenheim.

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
TALKING PICTURES

Jan. 2-17

Otto Preminger, helped by a law degree and his years in the theatre, was one of Hollywood's great adepts at filming people talking. Though he was known as a master of the courtroom scene, his work spanned all genres. A retrospective at Film Forum includes film noir ("Where the Sidewalk Ends"), melodrama ("Daisy Kenyon"), historical epic ("Exodus"), war ("In Harm's Way"), and even comedy ("The Moon Is Blue"). (212-727-8110.)

THE THEATRE
COEN BROTHER

Jan. 9

Atlantic Theatre Company, at its Stage 2 space, mounts three comic plays—"Waiting," "Four Benches," and "Debate"—by the filmmaker Ethan Coen, in a program titled "Almost an Evening." The ensemble cast includes F. Murray Abraham and Elizabeth Marvel. (212-239-6200.)

NIGHT LIFE
SOUTHERN CHARMS

Jan. 9-20

The Asylum Street Spankers, a long-standing freewheeling acoustic-music group from Austin, Texas, hit town next month for a musical revue about their glamorous calling, titled "What? And Give Up Show Biz?," at the Barrow Street Theatre. (212-239-6200.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
BEYOND WORDS

Jan. 16-17

Amid all the blather about "crossover" music, a few imaginative musicians are creating a viable post-classical genre. One of these is Jonny Greenwood, of Radiohead, whose grim and intense string orchestra piece "Popcorn Superhet Receiver" (parts of which are used in the Paul Thomas Anderson film "There Will Be Blood") will have its American première in the Wordless Music Series. (www.wordlessmusic.org.)

ART
FULL BLAST

Feb. 22-May 28

To call Cai Guo-Qiang's art explosive is no exaggeration: gunpowder and fireworks are high on his list of preferred materials. The Guggenheim Museum will present more than eighty works by the Chinese artist in the retrospective "I Want to Believe." (212-423-3500.)

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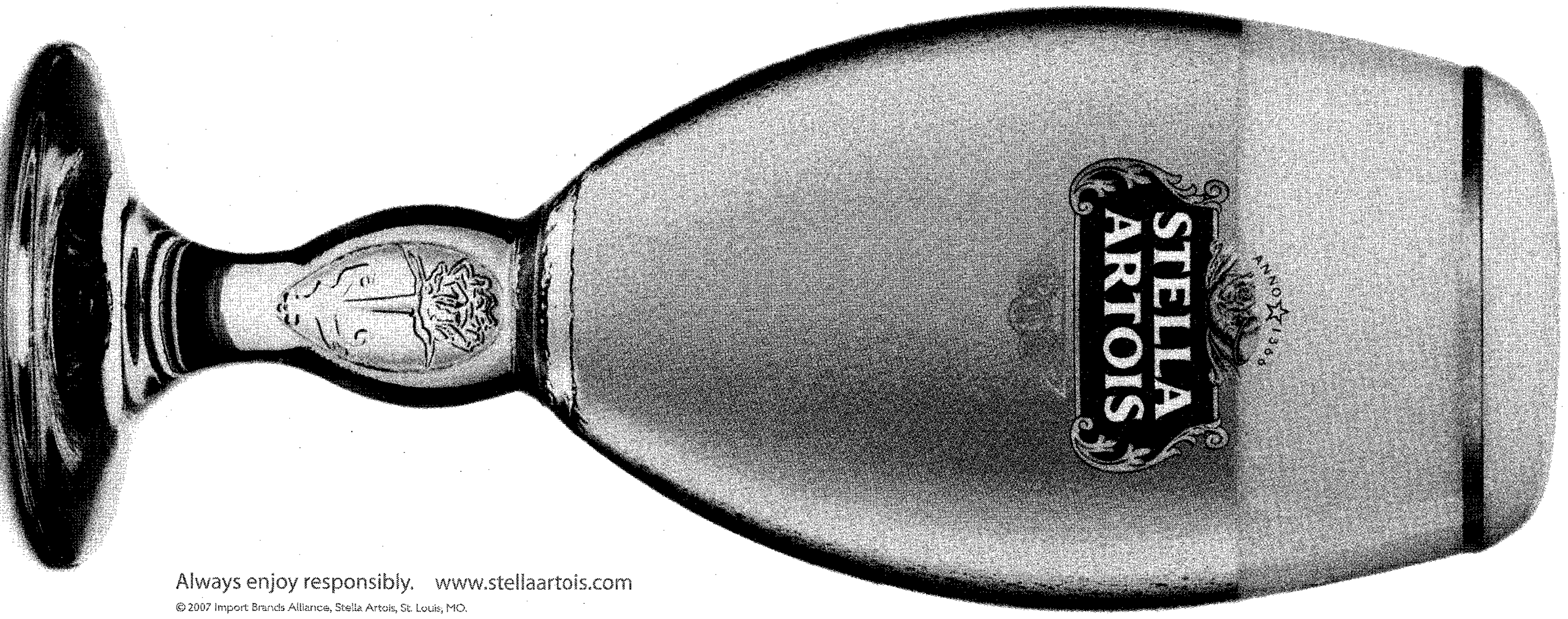

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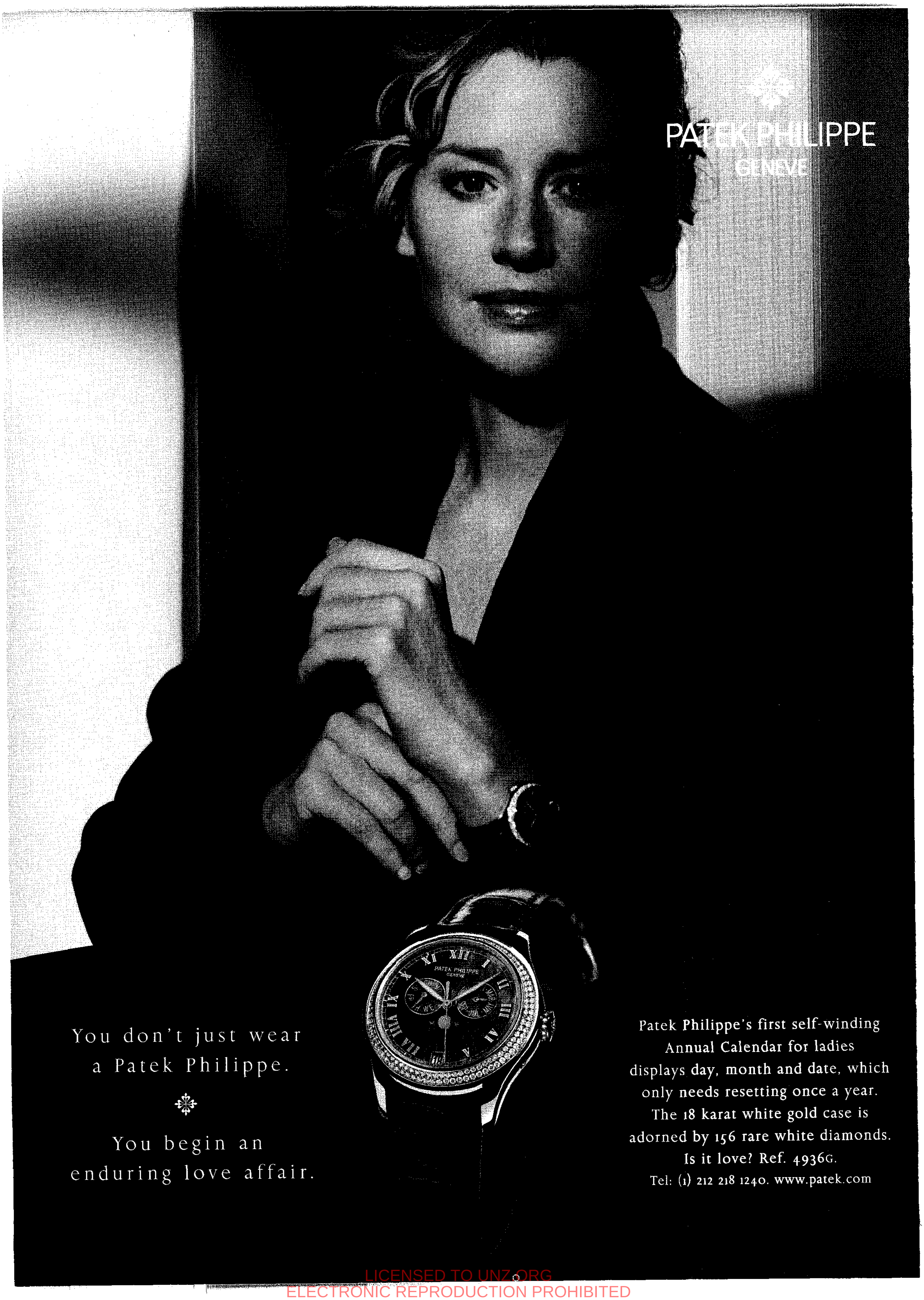

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THE
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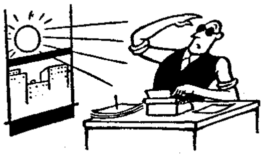
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
TESTING THE CLIMATE



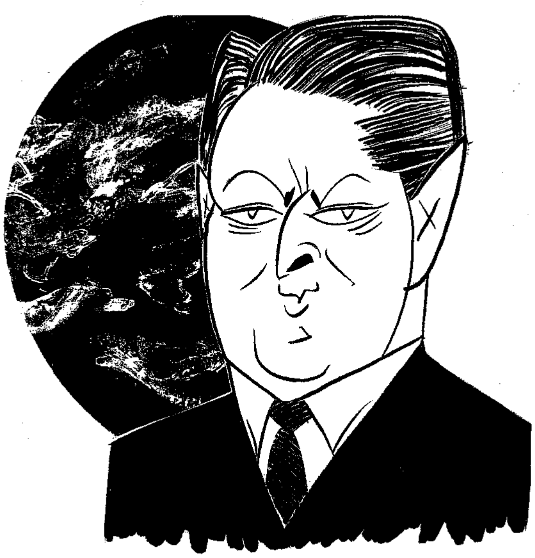
Last week, Al Gore, at the start of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, took note of a curious coincidence. Almost exactly seven years earlier—on December 12, 2000—the United States Supreme Court had called a halt to the Florida recount, thereby un-electing him President. "I read my own political obituary in a judgment that seemed to me harsh and mistaken—if not premature," Gore told the dignitaries assembled in Oslo. "But that unwelcome verdict also brought a precious if painful gift: an opportunity to search for fresh new ways to serve my purpose."

The Nobel Peace Prize is given out on the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death. It's the only prize that, following a quirk in Nobel's will, is administered by the Norwegians, rather than the Swedes, and the only one that is awarded not for solving a problem but for merely trying to. Sometimes, the hope expressed by the Nobel committee is realized—as it was by Nelson Mandela and Frederik Willem de Klerk, for example, in 1993. Just as often, the prize ends up honoring an illusion—Yasir Arafat, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin, in 1994—or a cause that's as hopeless as it is noble: the Dalai Lama, in 1989; Aung San Suu Kyi, in 1991.

What kind of prize will Gore's turn out to be? Though the answer to this question won't, of course, be known for years, in recent weeks there have been encouraging signs that the Goricle's message is getting through. At the end of November, in England, top executives of a hundred and fifty global businesses, including the C.E.O.s of Coca-Cola, DuPont, and United Technologies, issued a statement declaring that "the benefits of strong, early action on climate change outweigh the costs." The statement, which was released just before the latest round of international climate negotiations got under way, in Bali, called on world leaders, with perhaps a bit too much metaphorical vigor, to "seize this window of opportunity." A few days later, in Canberra, the new Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, took office and, within hours of his swearing in, signed his country on to the Kyoto Protocol. (Rudd's action left the United States the only major industrialized nation that has refused to ratify Kyoto, and thus accept binding greenhouse-gas reduction targets.)

The Bush Administration continued to temporize—in Bali, the American team managed to gum up negotiations on a treaty to succeed Kyoto, parts of which lapse in 2012—but it seems increasingly isolated, even within the borders of its own country. In early December, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approved a bill, co-sponsored by John Warner, Republican of Virginia—a self-described convert on the issue of climate change—that would reduce carbon emissions from major sources seventy per cent by 2050. All the top Democratic candidates for President have proposed "cap and trade" plans to sharply reduce America's carbon emissions, and, last week, all the top Republican contenders at least acknowledged, at their debate in Iowa, that global warming was a problem. Also last week, a federal judge handed yet another victory to California, which has been trying to impose tough CO_2 limits on automobiles. And the Senate approved an energy bill that, though drastically stripped down, finally raised federal fuel-efficiency standards for vehicles. (Congress has not tightened standards for cars in more than thirty years.)

But, for every bit of encouraging



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

news of one sort, recent weeks have also brought ominous news of another. The world's drought-prone semi-tropical belts are expanding both to the north and to the south. Melt from the Greenland ice sheet is accelerating. ("The amount of ice lost by Greenland over the last year is the equivalent of two times all the ice in the Alps, or a layer of water more than one-half mile deep covering Washington, D.C." is how Konrad Steffen, a climatologist at the University of Colorado, put it last week, releasing the results of a new study.) The Arctic sea ice is shrinking so fast that within the next few decades, if not years, it could be completely gone in summertime.

"The Arctic is often cited as the canary in the coal mine for climate warming," Jay Zwally, a climate expert at NASA, told the Associated Press. "Now as a sign of climate warming the canary has died."

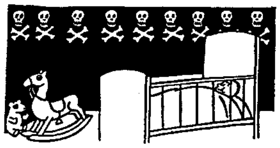
The Nobel Peace Prize committee, in its citation, called Gore "probably the single individual who has done most to create greater worldwide understanding" of what needs to be done to combat global warming. (Gore shared his prize with the members of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.) But the sad or, if you prefer, inconvenient truth is that the reason Gore is finally being heeded is that the reality of climate change has become manifest—something that can be seen and measured around the globe, and even felt in our everyday lives. Such is the inertia of the climate system that far more dramatic changes have already become inevitable. Gore received his prize before any meaningful action has been taken, but quite possibly at the last moment when such action is still practical. He is as aware of this irony as anyone, and his acceptance speech was grateful, hortatory, and, finally, pessimistic.

"Too many of the world's leaders are still best described in the words Winston Churchill applied to those who ignored Adolf Hitler's threat," he said at one point. " 'They go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent.' "

He continued, "So today we dumped another seventy million tons of global-warming pollution into the thin shell of atmosphere surrounding our planet, as if it were an open sewer. And tomorrow we will dump a slightly larger amount."

—*Elizabeth Kolbert*

LUMP OF COAL DEPT.
WHO'S SCROOGE?



The holiday season often arrives with a movie villain, and this year, in the tradition of "It's a Wonderful Life" (Old Man Potter) and "Bad Santa," comes "War on Greed," a series of Internet shorts whose first installment focusses on the putative Scrooge-like misdeeds of Henry Kravis, the private-equity man. The film, by Robert Greenwald, drafts Kravis as the new Grinch, and it argues for more regulation of the private-equity industry, juxtaposing images of Kravis's lavish life style (houses on Park Avenue and in Palm Beach and the Dominican Republic) and advantages (the fifteen-per-cent tax rate on capital gains) with commentary by ordinary Americans. Q: "What would you do if you lived in one of the Kravis homes for the holidays?" Little boy: "I would sell it and then I would buy every video game in the world."

The film's release came during a week when—separately but synergistically—interest groups marshalled by the Service Employees International Union held a "toxic toys" protest outside the Kohlberg Kravis Roberts headquarters, on Fifty-seventh Street. The protesters were lambasting K.K.R., a major owner of Toys R Us, for employing a miserly business model that, they said, results in lead and other toxic chemicals being used in toys. (Toys R Us recalled a number of house-brand toys this year, including a hundred and forty-five thousand Elite Operations military play sets.) About a dozen protesters assembled behind a sign that showed a picture of a crying baby and read, "Toys R Toxic? Mr. Kravis, they're not supposed to be." One man used a handheld X-ray device to test the lead content of a pink Toys R Us Hannah Montana backpack.

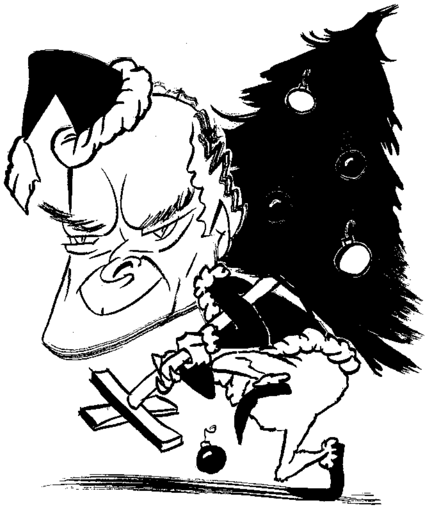
"Twenty-seven hundred parts per million!" he announced.

"What does that mean?" someone asked.

"It means brain damage!"

Greenwald's film had its première the next day, on the sidewalk outside Kravis's home at 625 Park Avenue. Three protesters wore sandwich boards embedded with flat-screen TVs, on which they planned to show the film to Kravis's neighbors. About twenty picketers, most of them wearing Santa hats and carrying bells, gathered at the corner of Park and Sixty-fifth. They included a community organizer ("I think Kravis is exploiting every child in this country"); two twenty-three-year-old labor canvassers ("The working class is getting screwed, mostly by politicians"); and an ex-Toys R Us delivery-truck driver with a "Hillary" button ("I think he's as bad as George Bush and Homeland Security"). The former truck driver led the crowd in chants of "Hey, hey! Ho, ho! Kravis has got to go!"

At the edge of a barricade, Christine Chavez, wearing a sandwich board, explained that she was something of a mercenary activist: she had been hired through an agency called GT Events, which provides promotional services for corporations (she makes twenty dollars an hour). "I do American Express, the Tribeca Film Festival, Snapple," she said. "This week, I've been giving out goodie bags for Verizon." She hadn't watched the Kravis film, but, she said, "I'm all for it."



Henry Kravis: Grinch?

A man in a beret asked what was going on.

"We're advertising the 'War on Greed,' " Chavez said. "It's about Henry Kravis, who's a billionaire, and for some reason he's not paying taxes while we all are."

"He lives in this building?"

"Yup," Chavez said. The man took a flyer and a DVD. Another passerby tried to view the film on Chavez's torso. "I can't hear anything," she said.

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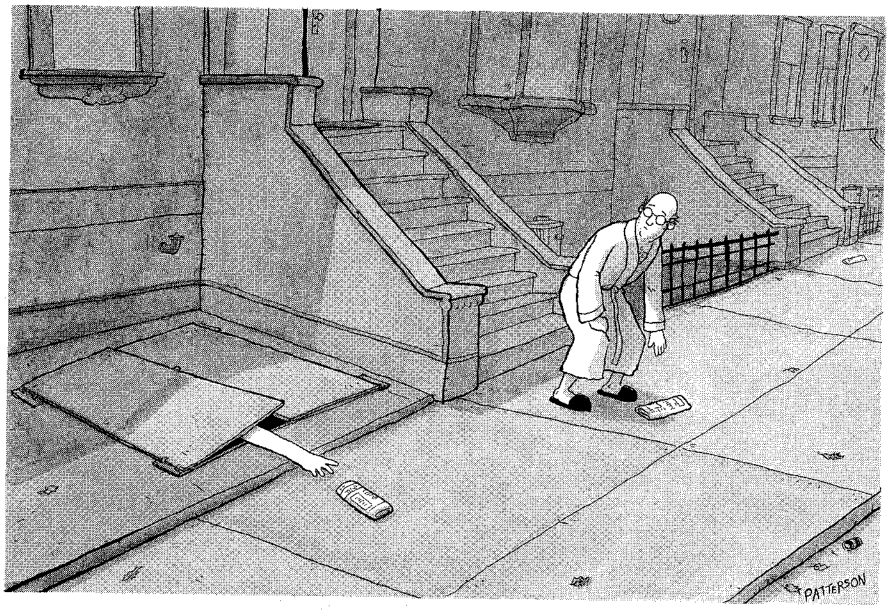

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A woman on her way to the dentist stopped and also took a flyer. "We have plenty of greed," she said. "We need a little more sharing." She looked at Kravis on the screen. "I've heard about him."

What is it about the holidays that makes people long for a Scrooge figure? Jeff Nunokawa, an English professor at Princeton and the author of "The Afterlife of Property," suggested, the other day, that the connection between Christmas and evil capitalists "comes straight from Dickens, no question." He went on, "It's much easier to concentrate this wickedness in a single figure. If it's not Kravis, it's someone else. We seem to need to find someone to turn into a pre-reformed Scrooge, to make ourselves feel better about our own Christmas spirit. Here's a good line from Nietzsche: 'Without cruelty, there is no festival.' "

—Lizzie Widdicombe

JAZZ DEPT.

LIFE ON MARS

Standing in line for tickets the other night at the Carnegie Hall box office, one could not be faulted for wondering: Why do so many observers of the cultural scene fret about older subscription audiences when tonight, for example, the lobby was filled with so many young men in attractive evening gowns? Admittedly, this was not a scientific survey, and yet there was a pleasant suspicion: Was Emanuel Ax drawing, at last, on an ever-widening transvestite fan base? If so, good for him!

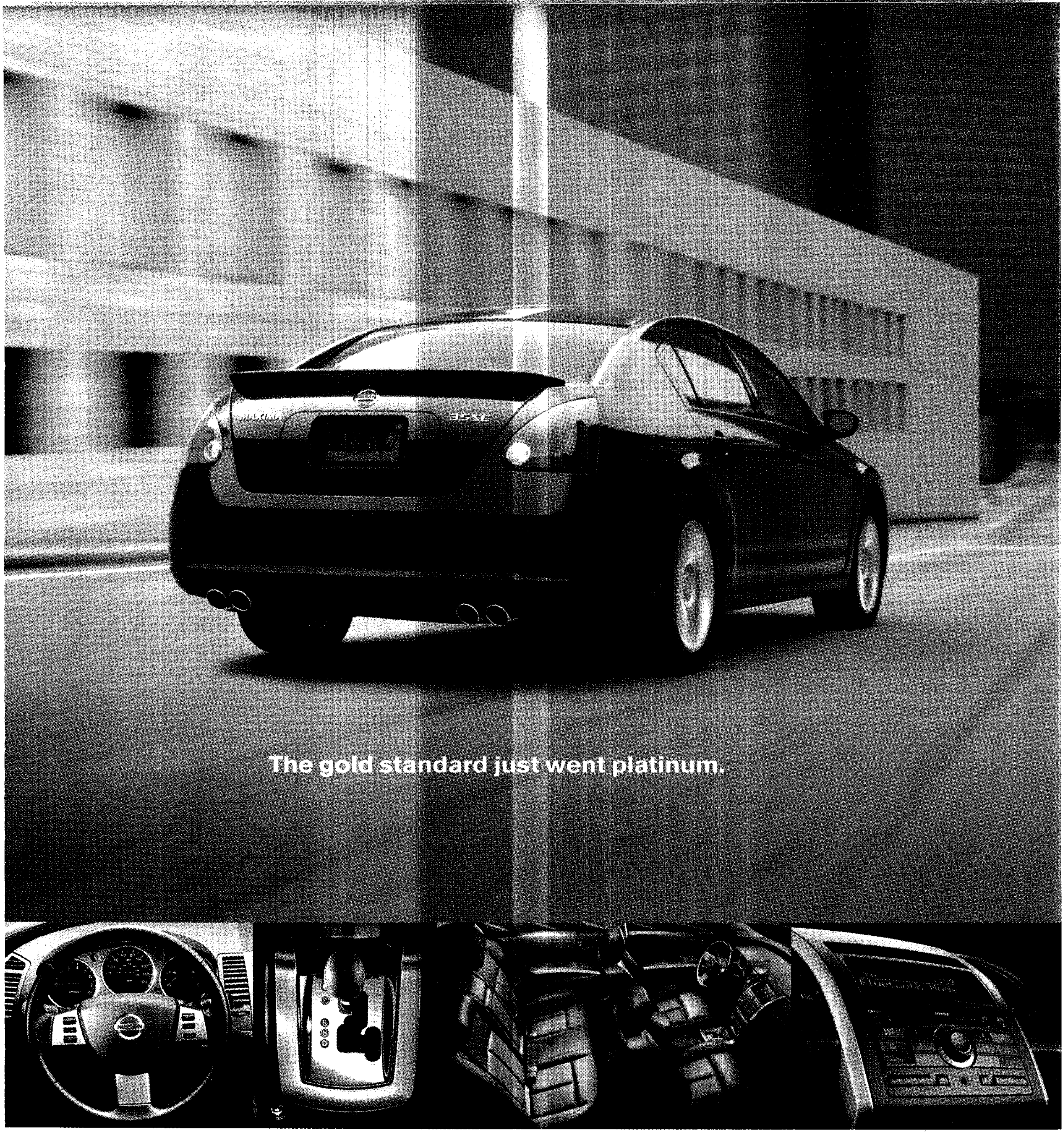
But, then, you know how it is—you pocket your tickets and go your own way, this time to see the jazz trio the Bad Plus, over at Zankel Hall, Carnegie's midsize jewel box for recitals and "special" performances. The Bad Plus are the Coen brothers of jazz: Midwesterners, both ironic and dead earnest, technically brilliant, beyond versatile, unembarrassedly derivative, a little chilly sometimes, but funny, surprising, and pretty hard to pin down. On seven albums and in performance, the three play mainly their own compositions, but their younger fans revere them (and sometimes the critics rake them) for their covers of heavily melodic pop tunes: Burt Bacharach's "This Guy's in Love with You," Aphex Twin's "Flim," Black Sabbath's "Iron Man," the Pixies' "Velouria." Their version of David Bowie's "Life on Mars" is spookily intelligent, and their "Heart of Glass," Blondie's big hit in 1979, is played as if through the filter of György Ligeti. And yet when it gets to the point where they are joyfully winging their way through the "Chariots of Fire" theme, you rightly ask, Are they kidding? Where late Coltrane sinned on the side of self-seriousness, is the Bad Plus going all wised-up and hyper-ironic on us?

Not so, Ethan Iverson, the pianist, says: no joke intended, they really do love these tunes. Jazz musicians have been adopting folk songs and Broadway melodies since the year zero. After all, "What is more ironic than Thelonious Monk's 'Just a Gigolo'?"

Onstage, the band members arrange themselves, left to right, from the deceptively stolid to the decidedly unhinged. Iverson is bald, goateed, besuited, and classically trained, and, when describing the tunes, he speaks in a spacey, Steven Wright monotone. One tune, Iverson gravely informed the Zankel audience, is "about a bowler named Bernie. He lived in Queens in the seventies." Another tune was "about a shy girl named Beryl. She's in high school and she hasn't, um, blossomed. But, um, you know. The future awaits. And when she's alone in her room she really lets loose." Iverson's theatricality is mainly in his hands—there is no Keith Jarrett moaning and keening, no Monk jig in his repertoire—but every once in a while he will levitate from the piano bench, just a bit, as if in a momentary trance, and then, just as quickly, he snaps out of it and sits his ass back down.

The bassist, Reid Anderson, and the drummer, David King, both look like the kind of brainy postadolescent urban males who are proud of the size and eclecticism of their iPod contents. They wear slouchy untucked shirts one size too small and sneakers. Anderson is moderate and thoughtful in his bearing, as calm in his way as his brother bassist John Entwistle, while King is a joyfully manic presence, grinning, grimacing, mugging, pretzeling his neck and torso as he plays—putting, as he says, "the whole body experience into the job." (Welcome back, Keith Moon.) King normally plays his drum parts with ordinary sticks, but occasionally he will wield a few toys, including a gong and a plastic yellow duck with a brushy thing on the end to swish against the drumhead.

As the world of jazz grows smaller, its quarrels and politics, like those of a



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college English department, grow only more intense. After the performance at Zankel, Iverson, King, and Anderson walked a couple of blocks uptown to Petrossian for a celebratory Martini and (very un-jazz, no?) a little caviar. They seemed to be well over some of the more bruising reviews they received after they first started recording and not terribly obsessed by all the debates about traditions, authenticity, and (the eternal doomsday subject) the possible end of jazz.

"We love John Coltrane, but sometimes jazz musicians suffer from the idea that they're Coltrane themselves, high-art priests," Anderson said. "They think if you let some pop sensibility into the music you're asking for trouble."

"We try not to leave anything out," Iverson said.

Someone mentioned that the concert had been packed, but so, too, was the concert in "the big hall," around the corner. It turned out that the transvestites had come not for Emanuel Ax's master class, in Weill Recital Hall, but for the redoubtable drag cabaret duo Kiki & Herb.

"Wow," Iverson said.

"Something for us to shoot for," said King.

—*David Remnick*

CHECK, PLEASE
THE FROG AT FORTY-FIVE

Walking past 3 East Fifty-second Street early on a Monday morning, a stranger in town might get the idea that La Grenouille is a high-end flower shop. All that is visible through the window is a vast tangle of blooms and buds, berries and fruits, and leafy branches the size of small trees: in spring, these include blossoming fruit branches, irises, tulips, and sweet peas; in autumn, hawthorn, chrysanthemums, late-blooming hydrangeas, and orange Japanese lanterns.

If the wandering stranger happened by at about 7 A.M., he would see La Grenouille's proprietor, Charles Masson, a trim, dark-haired man in jeans and a sweater, standing tensely inside the front door. He'd be watching for a delivery truck loaded with the booty that he had selected, stem by stem, two hours earlier in the wholesale flower district in the West Twenties. Masson spends more than a hundred thousand dollars a year there on the materials from which he creates a series of lavish floral displays that flatter his clientele.

"This is the most relaxing thing about working here," he said one recent Monday, preparing to start on the week's arrangements. "It's my favorite part of the week."

The tradition of filling La Grenouille with monumental, soaring bouquets was begun by Masson's father, also named Charles, who, with his wife, Gisèle, opened the restaurant forty-five years ago this week. It is the only survivor of an august group that included Lutèce, Le Pavillon, La Côte Basque, and La Caravelle—the last three having been offshoots of the seminal restaurant in the French pavilion of the 1939 New York World's Fair, where Masson père began as a waiter under the eye of the legendary Henri Soulé.

"My father was a born host and would do just about anything to please a customer," Masson said. "He had a passionate respect for nature and loved to garden and to match seasonal foods and flowers. He was a painter, too, as was his friend Bernard Lamotte, who used a studio upstairs in what is now the banquet room." Works by both artists, along with some by the present Charles Masson, now hang on the gold damask walls of La Grenouille's dining rooms.

"At first, I didn't want to work in the restaurant," Masson went on. "I went to Carnegie Mellon to study art. But when my father became ill and died, in 1975, I quit school and came back to help my mother run it. I was only nineteen and very shy around people, especially our clientele. The only thing about it that looked like fun was the trips to the flower market. I used to go with my father when I was a child. So I started with that."

For his Monday-morning arranging, Masson wandered between ten three-foot-tall glass vases, reaching up to fill them where they sat, on wide ledges above and behind tables. "Before I start, I put on goggles," he said, slipping on a pair, "because I once got a splinter in my eye as I clipped a branch." He placed two fat branches of golden oak leaves in a vase. "I find the directions for each bouquet in these big branches, which I put in first, crisscrossed, so the vase is balanced and will not tip over. Some of the bouquets are eighteen feet tall."

He moved on to roses: "I snap off the thorns that will be below the water level, so the stems can absorb better, but I leave on those above, so they do not take in too much air and let the flowers open too quickly." As for the trick of keeping the flowers fresh through Saturday, "That is a job!" he said. "I replace some flowers and change the water every morning. We can't lift those huge things down, so we use a hose and tank to siphon off the stale water and then run in fresh. I like vases made of clear glass, so dirty water would not only smell but it would look murky."

As an homage, for the forty-fifth anniversary he is using all of his father's favorite blossoms: "He loved flowering quince, deciduous holly, red dogwood, hot-pink nerines, and, the most beloved of all, red, white, and purple anemones that go with dusky red roses for the nosegays on the tables.

"Of course, people come here for the food," he said, seeming to suddenly remember this. In the kitchen, Matthew Tropeano, a twenty-eight-year-old American-born chef, is planning menus to match the flowers. (Of the thirty-two workers in La Grenouille's kitchen, not one is French. "They are impossible to work with," Masson said.) Among the seasonal specialties are a chartreuse (a mold of green cabbage enveloping pheasant, foie gras, and truffles), duck with quince, and poularde de Noël—chicken braised with sausages, chestnuts, and truffles. To mark the birthday, Masson is offering a forty-five-dollar three-course lunch. When he was asked if he had considered rolling back the prices to 1962 levels, he smiled. "That's a nice thought, but it's unlikely," he said. Forty-five years ago, a three-course dinner cost seven-fifty.

—*Mimi Sheraton*

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THE FINANCIAL PAGE
A BUYER'S CHRISTMAS

'Tis the season to buy. Of course, for Americans it's always the season to buy, but there is something special about the spending frenzy we engage in at holiday time. The Christmas shopping season can account for as much as forty per cent of a retail store's annual revenue and as much as three-quarters of its annual profit. So you might think that this would be a great time of year to be in the retail business. Instead, it's a desperate one. The markdowns that are supposed to come after Christmas have already begun. Internet mailboxes are flooded with offers of free shipping and huge discounts. Sales forecasts are gloomy, and weaker players have been weeded out—CompUSA has said that it will be closing in January. Much of this, certainly, is due to anxieties over the slowing economy and its effect on consumer spending; according to one recent study, foot traffic at retail stores fell in seven of the first eight months of the year. But it also reflects something bigger: the steady erosion of retailers' power. Americans are still the world's greatest consumers—they shell out four trillion dollars a year in retail spending—but it's surprisingly hard to make a lot of money selling them stuff.

That's not for lack of effort or ingenuity. Stores have poured time and money into devising tactics to pry open shoppers' wallets, and all these tactics are on display this season. They rest largely on a simple insight: because how much we want something and how much we're willing to spend on it is often a matter of context, successful selling is about controlling the context in which people shop. Stores run "doorbuster" sales on the day after Thanksgiving, offering huge markdowns for a few hours, or "one-day sales" every day, because fostering a sense of time pressure, however artificial, makes shoppers more willing to buy. Economists have found that shoppers try to establish a "reference price" for a product by looking to outside cues like list prices, so Christmas circulars include manufacturers' "suggested retail prices" along with the stores' "discounted" prices, making everything look like a bargain.

Even the sheer profusion of products available represents a strategic choice. In an experiment in the early nineteen-nineties, people were first asked whether they preferred a $110 microwave oven made by Emerson or a $180 oven made by Panasonic. Only forty-three per cent chose the Panasonic. But when a higher-priced Panasonic model, costing $200, was introduced into the mix, people's choices changed in a curious way: suddenly, sixty per cent wanted the $180 oven. Just adding a more expensive model made the medium-priced version look more attractive and boosted Panasonic's total sales. Change what surrounds a product, in other words, and you can change what people think of it.

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

Retailers are undeniably good at the tricks of their trade. So why has retailing gotten so hard? In part, it's because of imitation: when one store hits on a useful gimmick, competitors copy it. But it's the Internet that's made the biggest difference, albeit not in the ways we often think. People once believed that the Net was going to transform where we shopped—that it was going to make physical stores obsolete. It hasn't: even today, online sales are roughly three per cent of total retail sales in the U.S. What it has changed is how we shop, for a simple reason: it has created informed shoppers. In the past, retailers could make profits from what economists call "information asymmetry": sellers knew much more about prices, quality, and value than consumers did, in large part because good information for consumers was either hard to obtain or just not available at all. Today, it's easy to research and comparison-shop, and most consumers do it for at least some of their purchases. A recent study by Accenture found that two-thirds of those surveyed compared products online; a similar study, by the Consumer Electronics Association and Yahoo, found that more than three-quarters of electronics purchases are researched online but actually occur in conventional stores. And the amount of time people are spending on their research is far from trivial: fifteen hours for televisions, twelve for digital cameras, and so on.

The results of this shift are obvious. First, consumers know a lot more about prices than they once did. That makes it next to impossible for retailers to charge significantly more than their competitors, and makes discounting seem less impressive—if everyone's offering thirty per cent off, thirty per cent off stops looking like a bargain and becomes the reference price. It's harder to create a sense of urgency around short-term sales, since it's clear that if you don't buy today you'll be offered a similar price somewhere else tomorrow. And the wealth of online product reviews and commentary has made the cues that stores use to shape shoppers' perception of quality and value far less effective.

This doesn't mean that consumers are impervious to retailers' tricks, and plenty of us shop the way Homer Simpson orders wine: buy the second-least-expensive thing on the list. And one obvious example of consumer irrationality continues to work in stores' favor; namely, the Christmas shopping season itself. It's not surprising that, as traditional tactics have become less useful, retailers have responded by making the holiday season weeks longer than it used to be. Still, there's no disguising the fact that power has shifted from sellers to shoppers. And that's left retailers in a strange position: soon the only hope of turning a profit will be to offer good value for money. What a radical concept!

—*James Surowiecki*

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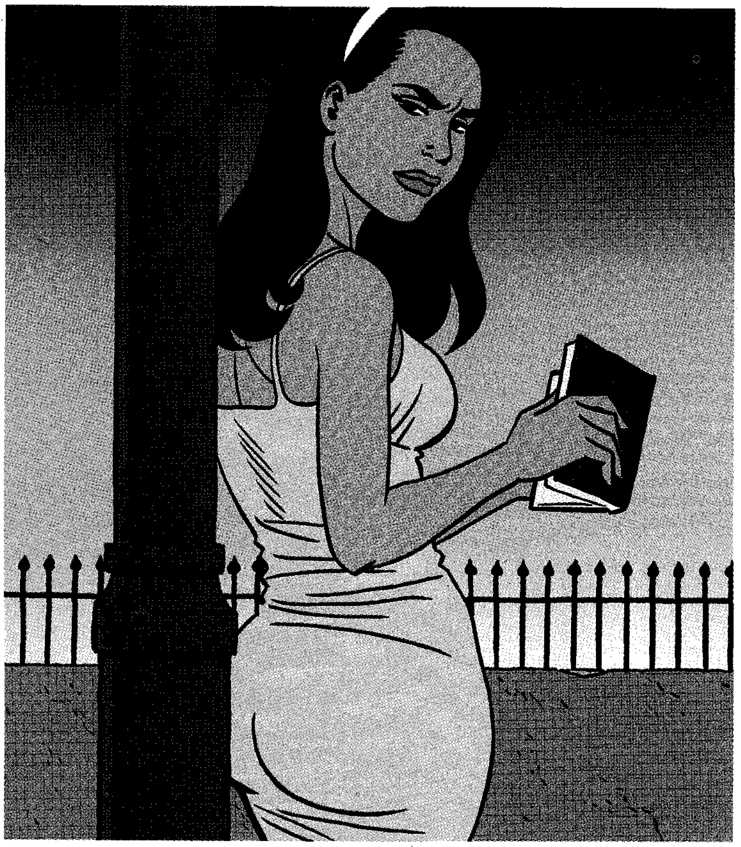
FICTION

ALMA

BY JUNOT DÍAZ



JAIME HERNANDEZ

You have a girlfriend named Alma, who has a long tender horse neck and a big Dominican ass that seems to exist in a fourth dimension beyond jeans. An ass that could drag the moon out of orbit. An ass she never liked until she met you. Ain't a day that passes that you don't want to press your face against that ass or bite the delicate sliding tendons of her neck. You love how she shivers when you bite, how she fights you with those arms that are so skinny they belong on an after-school special.

Alma is a Mason Gross student, one of those Sonic Youth, comic-book-reading alternatinas without whom you might never have lost your virginity. Grew up in Hoboken, part of the Latino community that got its heart burned out in the eighties, tenements turning to flame. Spent nearly every teen-age day on the Lower East Side, thought it would always be home, but then N.Y.U. and Columbia both said *nyet*, and she ended up even farther from the city than before. She is in a painting phase, and the people she paints are all the color of mold, look like they've just been dredged from the bottom of a lake. Her last painting was of you, slouching against the front door: only your frowning I-had-a-lousy-Third-World-childhood-and-all-I-got-was-this-attitude eyes recognizable. She did give you one huge forearm. *I told you I'd get the muscles in.* The past couple of weeks, now that the warm is here, Alma has abandoned black, started wearing these nothing dresses made out of what feels like tissue paper; it wouldn't take more than a strong wind to undress her. She says she does it for you: *I'm reclaiming my Dominican heritage* (which ain't a complete lie—she's even taking Spanish to better minister to your mom), and when you see her on the street, flaunting, flaunting, you know exactly what every nigger that walks by is thinking. You met at the weekly Latin parties at the DownUnder in New Brunswick. She never went to those parties, was dragged there by her high-school best friend, Patricia, who still listened to TKA, and this was how you got the chance to strike while, as your boys put it, the pussy was hot.

Alma is slender as a reed, you a steroid-addicted block; Alma loves driving, you books; Alma owns a Saturn (bought for her by her carpenter father, who speaks only English in the house), you have no points on your license; Alma's nails are too dirty for cooking, your spaghetti con pollo is the best in the land. You are so very different—she rolls her eyes every time you turn on the news and says she can't "stand" politics. She won't even call herself Hispanic. She brags to her girls that you're a "radical" and a real Dominican (even though on the Plátano Index you wouldn't rank, Alma being only the third Latina you've ever really dated). You brag to your boys that she has more albums than any of them do, that she says terrible white-girl things while you fuck. She's more adventurous in bed than any girl you've had; on your first date she asked you if you wanted to come on her tits or her face, and maybe during boy training you didn't get one of the memos but you were, like, umm, neither. And at least once a week she will kneel on the mattress before you and, with one hand pulling at her dark nipples, will play with herself, not letting you touch at all, fingers whisking the soft of her and her face looking desperately, furiously happy. She loves to talk while she's being dirty, too, will whisper, You like watching me don't you, you like listening to me come, and when she finishes lets out this long demolished groan and only then will she allow you to pull her into an embrace as she wipes her gummy fingers on your chest. This is me, she says.

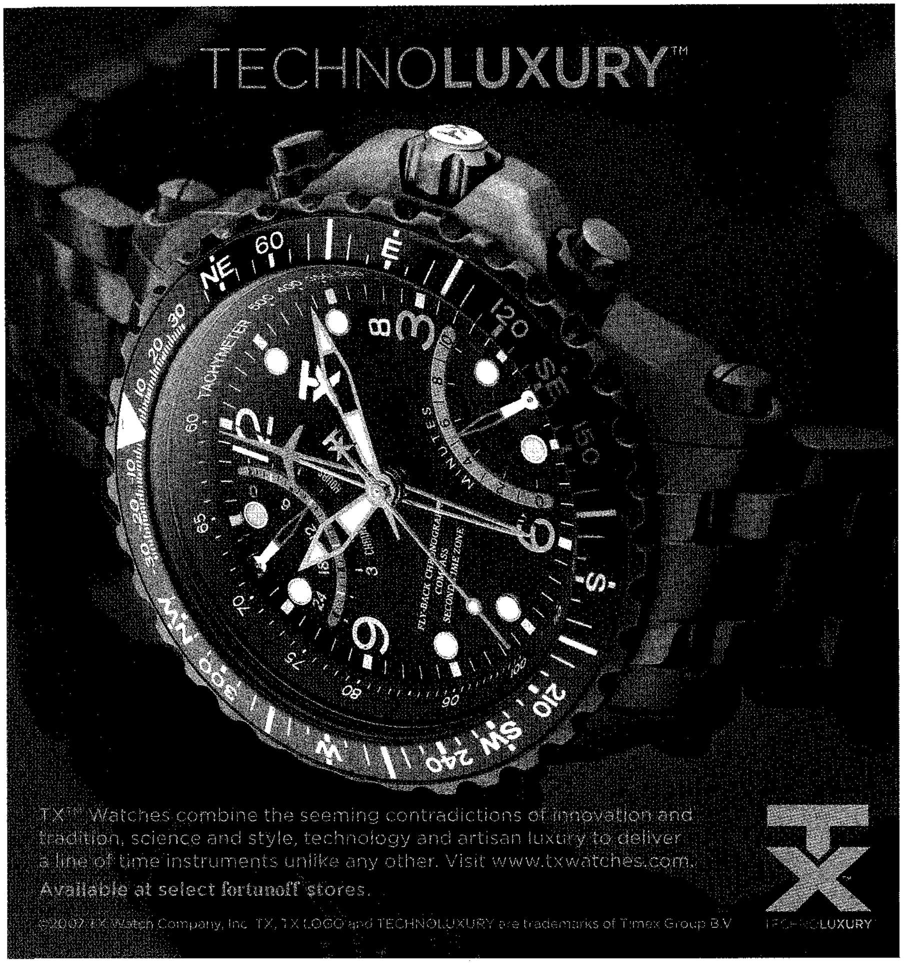
Yes—it's an opposites-attract sort of thing, it's a great-sex sort of thing, it's a no-thinking sort of thing. It's wonderful! Wonderful! Until one June day Alma discovers that you are also fucking this beautiful freshman girl named Laxmi, discovers the fucking of Laxmi because she, Alma, the girlfriend, opens your journal and reads. (Oh, she had her suspicions.) She waits for you on the stoop, and when you pull up in her Saturn and notice the journal in her hand your heart plunges through you like a fat bandit through a hangman's trap. You take your time turning off the car. You are overwhelmed by a pelagic sadness. Sadness at being caught, at the incontrovertible knowledge that she will never forgive you. You stare at her incredible legs and between them, to that even more incredible pópola you've loved so inconstantly these past eight months. Only when she starts walking over in anger do you finally step out. You dance across the lawn, powered by the last fumes of your outrageous sinvergüenzería. Hey, muñeca, you say, prevaricating to the end. When she starts shrieking, you ask her, Darling, what ever is the matter? She calls you:

a cocksucker
a punk motherfucker
a fake-ass Dominican.
She claims:
you have a little penis
no penis
and worst of all that you like curried pussy.

(Which really is unfair, you try to say, since Laxmi is technically from Guyana, but Alma isn't listening.)

Instead of lowering your head and copping to it like a man, you pick up the journal as one might hold a baby's beshatted diaper, as one might pinch a recently be-nutted condom. You glance at the offending passages. Then you look at her and smile a smile your dissembling face will remember until the day you die. Baby, you say, baby, this is part of my novel.

This is how you lose her. ♦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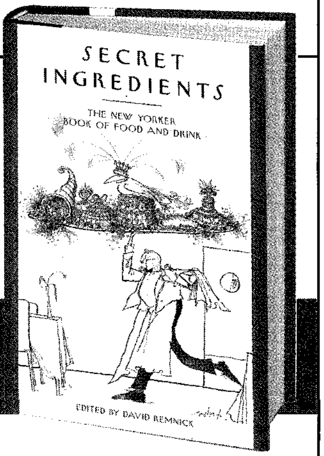

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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

DEMOLITION MAN

Harold Pinter and "The Homecoming."

BY JOHN LAHR

On a grisly London evening last October, as the Victorian street lamps of Holland Park were flickering in the twilight, I arrived too early for an appointment at Harold Pinter's handsome town house. Pinter, who is seventy-seven, and who, for the past five years, has battled esophageal cancer and a rare skin disease that has twice brought him near death, had insisted that I come by, even though he'd been ill earlier in the week. "Better strike while the iron is hot," he'd said. I could see him through the high, arched window of his living room, parked in an armchair by the fire, almost sculptural. A walker was strategically positioned behind him. For decades a dynamo—the author of some thirty plays and two dozen screenplays, the director of more than twenty productions, and an influence on such dramatists as Heathcote Williams, Joe Orton, David Hare, and David Mamet—Pinter was winding down.

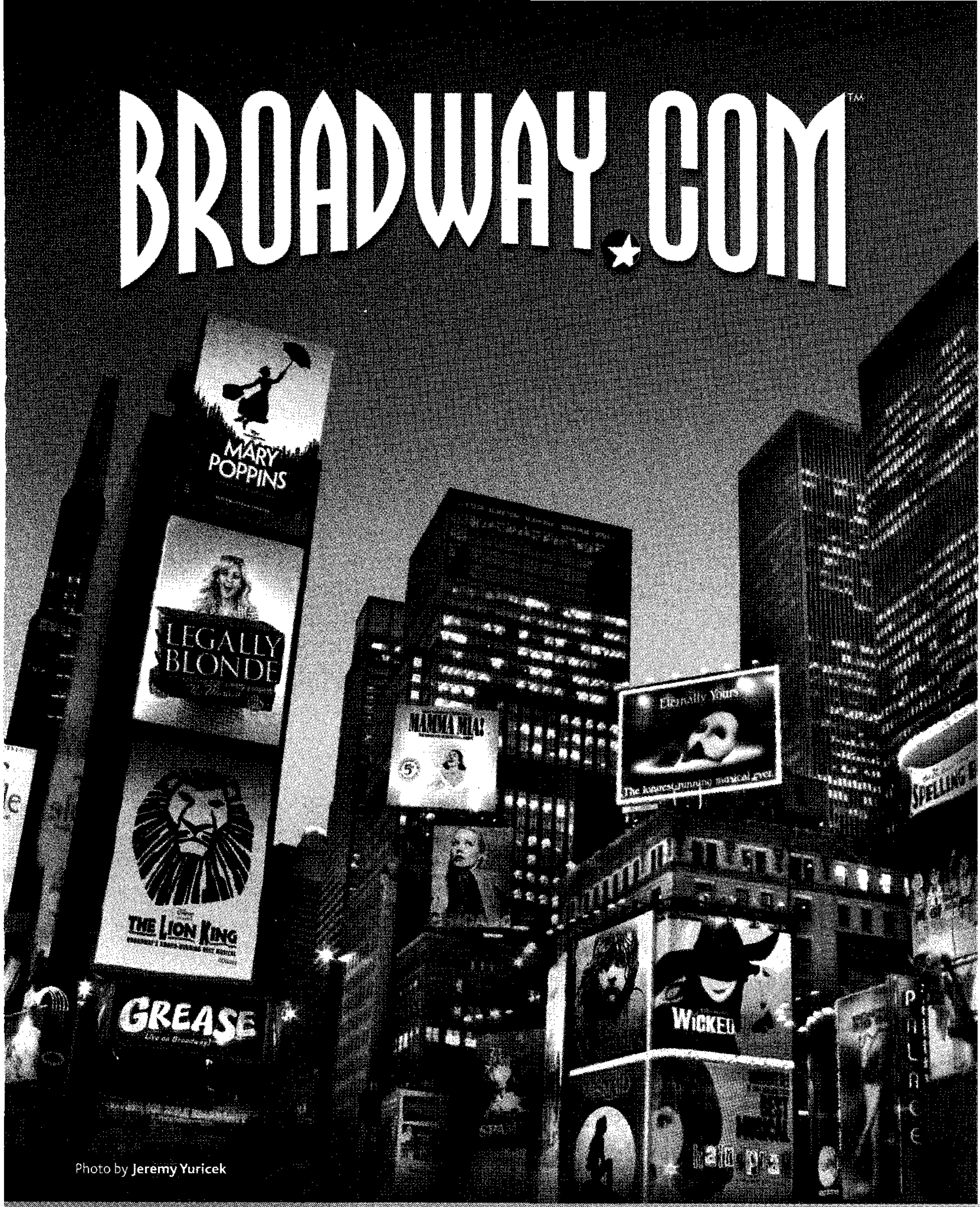
Pinter in 1962, two years before "The Homecoming." Photograph by Cecil Beaton.

SOTHEBY'S

Over the years, Pinter's work has inspired a journal (*The Pinter Review*), added words to the English language (the Oxford English Dictionary lists "Pinteresque," "Pinterism," "Pinterian," and "Pinterishness" as acceptable terms), won dozens of awards, including the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 2005, and made him an object of perpetual public fascination in Britain. (His recent performance in Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape," at the Royal Court—he began his career as an actor—sold out its entire run in sixteen minutes.) No other British playwright since Noël Coward has so dominated and defined the theatrical landscape of his time. Even Coward, who hated the New Wave that put him out of fashion, considered Pinter an exception. "Your writing absolutely fascinates me," he wrote to Pinter in 1965 after seeing his third full-length play, "The Homecoming." "You cheerfully break every rule of the theatre that I was brought up to believe in, except the cardinal one of never boring for a split-second. I love your choice of words, your resolute refusal to *explain* anything and the arrogant, but triumphant demands you make on the audience's imagination. I can well see why some clots hate it, but I belong to the opposite camp—if you will forgive the expression."

I leaned against a wall rereading "The Homecoming," which was what I'd come to discuss with Pinter and which was about to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of its début on Broadway with a new production at the Cort Theatre (directed by Daniel Sullivan). The paperback copy of the play that I held in my hands had been purchased during the Broadway début, at the Music Box, under the sensational direction of Peter Hall, in 1967. I'd seen the show on a Tuesday, bought the play at intermission, and returned to the Wednesday matinée to notate the blocking.

"The Homecoming" changed my life. Before the play, I thought words were just vessels of meaning; after it, I saw them as weapons of defense. Before, I thought theatre was about the spoken; after, I understood the eloquence of the unspoken. The position of a chair, the length of a pause, the choice of a gesture, I realized, could convey volumes. In 1967, I didn't know quite what I'd seen; I knew only that the play's spectacular combination of mystery and rigor had taught me something new about life, about language, about the nature of dramatic storytelling. Pinter had taken the narration out of theatre: "The Homecoming" offered no explanations, no theory, no truths, no through line, no certainties of any kind. I was drawn to the charisma of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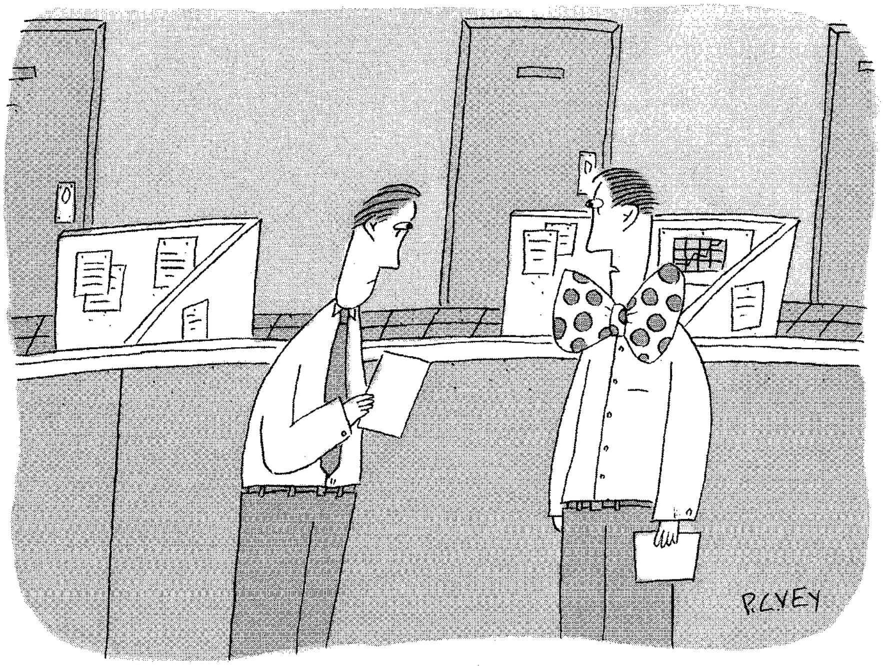
the work in the same way that Pinter—I later learned—had been compelled by Shakespeare. "You are called upon to grapple with a perspective in which the horizon alternately collapses and re-forms behind you, in which the mind is subject to an intense diversity of atmospheric," he wrote in "A Note on Shakespeare," in 1950, six years before he started to do a similar thing with his own plays.

I was teaching night school when I first saw "The Homecoming," and I wanted to use the play in my class. I wrote to Pinter in care of the theatre. To my amazement, he replied. We met at Sam's, near the Music Box, on Forty-fifth Street. I was twenty-six. I had never met a playwright before. I couldn't have known then how frequently our paths would intersect over the decades: "The Homecoming" was the subject of my first book; for a few years in the early eighties, Pinter's son, Daniel Brand, from whom he is now estranged, was a tenant in my house; and my friend and downstairs neighbor in London, the director Karel Reisz, was probably the best interpreter of Pinter's later plays and the director of one of Pinter's best screen adaptations, "The French Lieutenant's Woman" (1981). While Reisz and Pinter were working on their screenplay, Pinter's silver Mercedes convertible was often parked outside our house. Once, just before a work session, my wife and our four-year-old son, Chris, sat at Reisz's kitchen table with Pinter as he held forth in his commanding manner. When Pinter left the room, Chris turned to us and asked, "Is he a policeman?" "No," his mother said. "He's a very good writer." "Can he make a 'W'?" Chris asked. (Pinter alluded to that incident in his introduction to Volume IV of his "Plays"; "One of the most interesting—and indeed acute—critical questions I've ever heard," he wrote.)

"The Homecoming" is the last and best play of Pinter's fecund early period (1957-65). It is a culmination of the poetic ambiguities, the minimalism, and the linguistic tropes of his earlier major plays: "The Birthday Party" (1958), whose first production lasted only a week in London, though the play was seen by eleven million people when it was broadcast on TV in 1960, and "The Caretaker" (1960), an immediate international hit. "The Homecoming" is both a family romance and a turf war. A professor of philosophy, Teddy, returns to London after six years in America to introduce his wife, Ruth, to his father, a butcher named Max, to his uncle Sam, a chauffeur, and to his brothers, Lenny, a pimp, and Joey, an aspiring boxer, all of whom haunt Max's cavernous living room, a sort of cave for the barbarians within.

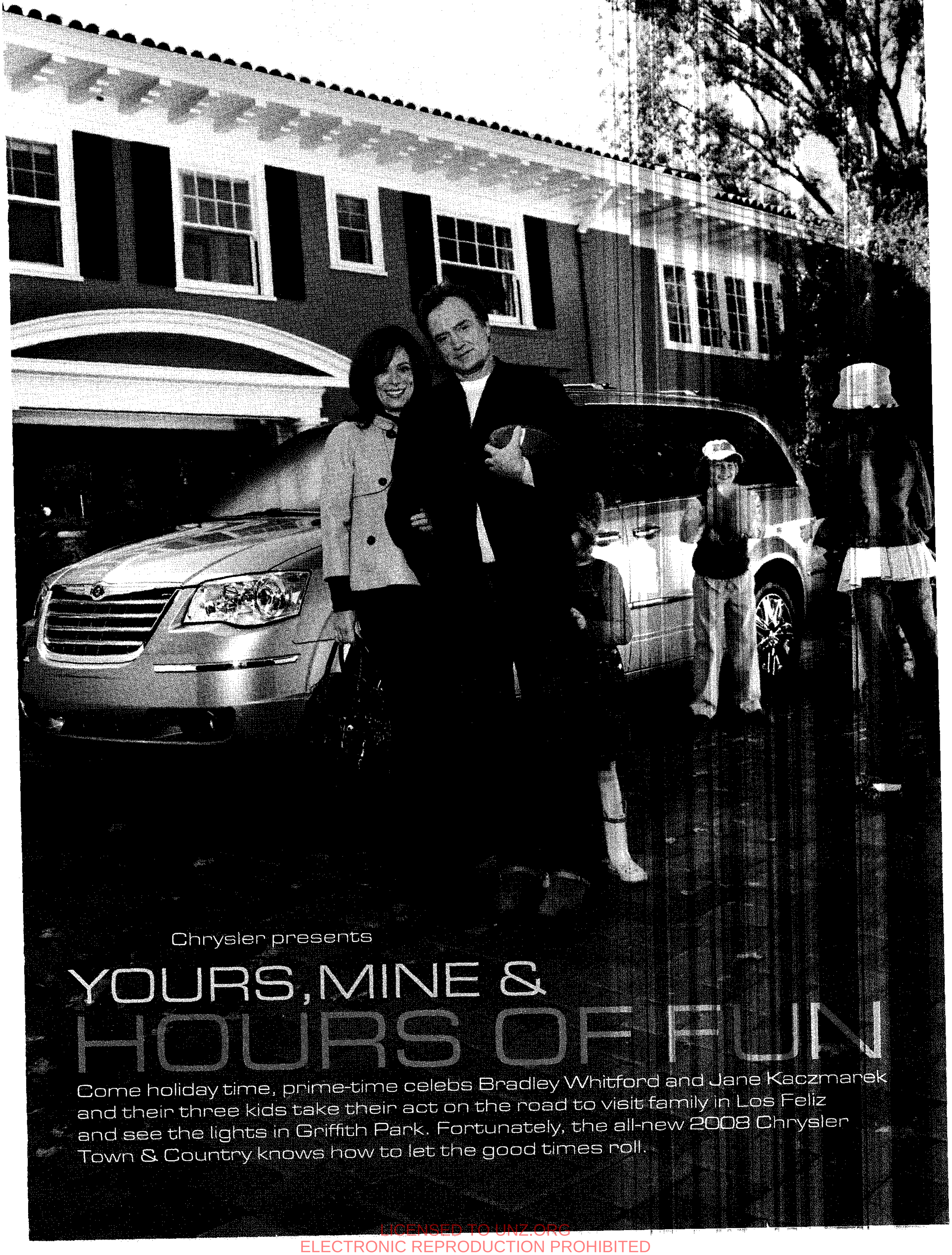


"Take my advice—never let anybody talk you into joining the Tie-of-the-Month Club."

By contrast, Pinter's living room is capacious and elegant, overflowing with books, family photographs, paintings, and flowers. The first time I met Pinter to talk about "The Homecoming," he was dressed in a black leather jacket, a black turtleneck, and black pants; forty years later, he was still in black, except for a raffish pair of pink wool socks that he wore, he explained, for circulation reasons. Pinter has always been as vigilant about his look as about his prose. He is not a dandy; he is an actor in the habit of watching himself go by. The beloved only son of a Jewish East End tailor, he was, even as a young man, what might then have been called "natty." Black, his favored color, set him apart and generated an aura of authority about him; it also worked as a kind of spotlight, focussing the viewer's eye on the sharp features of his large head. Like his plays, the young Pinter combined an external formality with an internal ferocity.

Even now, recuperating from illness, he had an exactness, a scrupulousness of mental focus, that generated a palpable tension. In his negotiations with the world, Pinter always seems braced. "There is a sense of danger about him all the time," Peter Hall, who has directed seven of Pinter's plays, including "Betrayal" (1978), the best drama of his middle period, told me. "Although he's the most good-hearted and generous man, people are frightened of him. He has this stentorian voice and a very rich vocabulary. He also has a kind of physical presence. You can quite see him hitting somebody." When I leaned forward to pour the wine that had been set out for us, Pinter took the bottle away from me. "I can still pour a glass of wine," he said.

"The author's position is an odd one," Pinter said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. "The characters resist him; they are not easy to live with; they are impossible to define. You certainly can't dictate to them. To a certain extent, you play a never-end-



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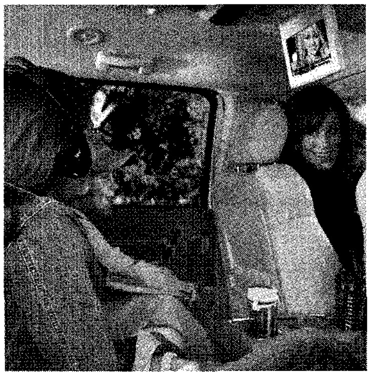

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I SPY... OR DO I?

In-floor storage includes bins that let Jane and Mary Louisa stash plenty of presents out of sight. Speaking of things that are in and out of sight, Mary Louisa's favorite car game is "I spy." However, since she tends always to spy the same three items inside the vehicle, the game is usually a short one.

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From Dove Cottage, I sloped out through the side gate
and climbed the corpse road past the coffin stone,
then curved through a mixed copse to a scree path
scored by rainwater into the hill's back.
I was hauled upward by a borrowed dog
on a makeshift leash, a yellow Labrador,
busy for every birdcall and blown leaf.
Over a hand-stacked wall, in the next fold,
under the driftwood bones of an old elm,
a red deer had dropped down from the high fell
with morning beaconed in its flaming horns.
With dawn-light cradled in its branching crown.
I stood in some blind spot of its dark eye,
and deer and dog were still and unaware
and stayed that way, divided by the wall,
wild stag and hunting hound in separate worlds,
before the deer pushed on through tinder thickets,
igniting the next wold. And the dog yawned.
Then I hacked up the ghyll to higher ground,
toward the hill's bare head, counting the dead
and the hikers striding along the ridge,
thinking of taking a drink from the tarn,
thinking of adding a new stone to the cairn.

—*Simon Armitage*

ing game with them, cat and mouse, blind-man's bluff, hide-and-seek." In "The Homecoming," Pinter's game of hide-and-seek begins with the play's ironic title. Whose homecoming is it? At first glance, it seems to be Teddy's. Or is it Ruth's? As we discover, she was born nearby. Ruth knows the lay of this desiccated land, with its reservoirs of furious disappointment. Her comfort in this milieu is what makes credible her eventual outrageous decision to leave Teddy and her three children and stay in Max's female-starved household. In this neglected environment, Ruth, at last, feels needed. In one way or another, she is the object of each man's hidden desires: the aging Max wants to feel potent; Sam wants company; Joey wants to be nurtured; and Lenny wants a trick to put on the game. Sensual, elegant, and private, Ruth hides her anger behind a façade of self-control—which Pinter makes clear, in a scene in which she encounters Lenny on the night of her arrival. Ruth knows Lenny's argot; she reads the vulnerability behind his brazen aggression. Later, when Lenny tries to take a glass of water from her hand, Ruth calls his bluff. She holds her glass toward him:

> RUTH: Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass.
> *He is still.*
> Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip.
> *She pats her lap. Pause.*
> *She stands, moves to him with the glass.*
> Put your head back and open your mouth.
> LENNY: Take that glass away from me.
> RUTH: Lie on the floor. Go on. I'll pour it down your throat.
> LENNY: What are you doing, making me some kind of proposal?
> *She laughs shortly, drains the glass.*

"The Homecoming"'s territorial free-for-all is waged with a rhetorical panache that is almost Jacobean in its richness and its ferocity. Its vulgar verbal impasto created a stage sound that was entirely new. Pinter, according to David Hare, "cleaned the gutters of the English language." "He kicked the whole thing down," David Mamet said. Nowhere in the decorous restraint of postwar British theatre could you hear, for instance, anything approaching the brio of Max's roaring tirades at his "wet wick" brother: "One lot after the other. One mess after the other. . . . Look what I'm lumbered with. One cast-iron bunch of crap after another. One flow of stinking pus after another." Until Pinter, contemporary British playwrights had purveyed a series of well-made forms of exposition. Terence Rattigan admonished society in neatly resolved problem plays; John Osborne hectored Britain and took its temperature; Noël Coward made charm his solution; Arnold Wesker sent a Socialist message through his characters, and T. S. Eliot a Christian one. "The attitude behind this sort of thing might be summed up in one phrase: '*I'm* telling *you*,'" Pinter said in 1962.

Pinter's plays, on the other hand, offered no exhortations, no admonitions, no solutions, no common ground among people. "I think there's a shared common ground all right, but that it's more like a quicksand," he wrote. "We are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened?" Pinter's plays reënact this difficulty of knowing. "Meaning which is resolved, parceled, labelled and ready for export is dead . . . and meaningless," he wrote in a letter to the first director of "The Birthday Party," in which he refused to explain his characters. In another letter, to a British theatre magazine, in 1958, Pinter wrote, "To supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to me facile, impertinent, and dishonest. Where this takes place it is not theatre but a crossword puzzle. The audience holds the paper. The play fills in the blanks. Everyone's happy. There has been no conflict between audience and play, no participation, nothing has been exposed. We walk out as we went in."

At the brilliant finale of "The Homecoming," as Ruth is enthroned in Max's chair, with the new order established and the men grouped around her, Max falls to the floor and sobs; he crawls toward Ruth, who is stroking Joey's hair like a lap cat. "I'm not an old man," Max says. "Do you hear me? Kiss me." As the curtain falls, it is clear that the distribution of power among the people onstage is poised to change. But neither the characters nor the audience knows what that rearrangement will be. Earlier in the play, Lenny tells a tall tale about having beaten a woman who was "falling apart with the pox." Ruth punctures his story with a practical question: "How did you know she was diseased?" "How did I know?" Lenny says. "I decided she was." The truth, in other words, is anybody's guess. Meaning is what you make it. (Pinter's refusal to draw conclusions in his plays means that some productions capitulate to the anxiety of the unknown. When the curtain came up on a Bulgarian staging of "The Homecoming," he thought he was in the wrong theatre. "A large man and a small woman were running around the stage, looking into a lighted house," he said. "They kept coming back, these two, in various guises and modes." These additions turned out to be two frequently invoked but always offstage characters—MacGregor, Max's legendary mate, and Jessie, Max's faithless wife.)

The territorial battle being waged in "The Homecoming" is ultimately not about the house or the woman but about whose perception of reality will prevail. Teddy, a professional maker of meanings, insists, "I'm the one who can see. That's why I can write my critical works." Ruth, however, has a physicality that overrides Teddy's epistemology. "Look at me," she says. "I . . . move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear . . . underwear . . . which moves with me . . . it . . . captures your attention. . . . The action is simple. It's a leg . . . moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict . . . your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant . . . than the words which come through them." The thrill of the play is its realization of Pinter's aesthetic: a precarious balance between ambiguity and actuality. "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false," Pinter said in his Nobel speech. "A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false." This paradoxical approach forces both the actors and the audience to play harder. Both are drawn into a highly charged dramatic metaphor in which, as Pinter said, "everything to do with the play is in the play."

The characters' parries, challenges, and volte-faces are violently emotional improvisations, whose drama is only underscored and heightened by Pinter's signature pauses. "The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear," he once wrote. "It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place." "When we were rehearsing 'The Homecoming,' " Peter Hall told me, "I remember Paul Rogers saying to me, very early on, 'What's all this about the pauses? We decide where the pauses are.' And I said, 'No, you don't. Not anymore. The author has decreed where the pauses are. It's our job to find out why they're there.' "

"One pause is quite unlike another pause," Pinter said suddenly as we were talking, then stopped. "There, I just paused. That didn't take me very long. A pause can be a breath. What it has to do with is thought: what has just been said and how to respond to what has been said. Pauses are not musical devices. They should be natural." Pinter's wife, the historian and biographer Lady Antonia Fraser, describes pauses as "the curse of Pinter." Pinter has sometimes cursed them as well. He attended a rehearsal for one all-star production of "The Homecoming" (with Pierre Brasseur, Emmanuelle Riva, and Claude Rich, at the Théâtre de Paris) that he thought ran an hour too long. "They took my word 'pause' literally," he said. "It was an extremely tedious enterprise."

"Who had the garden salad?"

"The Homecoming" is a summation of the iconoclasm and the truculence that brought Pinter to the peak of his writing career. When he was a young man, anger defined him. "I'd never met anyone like this before," Dilys Hamlett, an early girlfriend of Pinter's, told his biographer Michael Billington. "I always have an image of Harold striding down the street in his navy-blue coat with a rage against the world. But it was also a rage for life, a rage to do something, a rage to achieve something." By the time he was twenty, Pinter had renounced Jewish orthodoxy, military service (he was a conscientious objector), and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art; by the time he was thirty, he had abdicated the principles of contemporary dramaturgy.

He wrote "The Homecoming" in six weeks in 1964. "It kind of wrote itself," he said. He remembers being surprised by the process and laughing a lot at the toxic, belligerent family that was emerging from him. By then, Pinter had got together enough money to move, with his first wife, the actress Vivien Merchant, and their infant son, from a cramped flat in Chiswick to a bow-fronted Regency house in Worthing, on the Sussex coast. The magnificent barrenness of the play's North London setting was imagined as he sat at his writing desk overlooking gardens, within earshot of the sea.

When Pinter finished the play, he gave it to Joe Brearley, the inspirational teacher who had first introduced him to drama when he was still a student at

[illegible] PRESENTS

THE ART OF THE STORY

[illegible] and transporting tales of memory, wit, and warmth are spun at The Moth, the storytelling organization based in New York City. Wanda Bullard, featured inside, hosted the very first Moth evenings on her porch in Georgia, where she and Moth founder, George Dawes Green, would frequently gather with friends. He later relocated and began holding informal gatherings in New York, which have now grown into this nationally celebrated not-for-profit organization. The following is the last in a yearlong series of story adaptations, all of which can be read in their entirety on The Moth's website.

[illegible]

a hilarious Southern tale of truth, justice, and the power of belief in a stranger's promise. ▸

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Everyone Has a Story

THE SMALL-TOWN PRISONER

A Selection From The Moth's "Best Mothers and Fathers Stories"

WANDA BULLARD was the youngest child born to a colorful and much-loved local Mississippi character—her dad. A special education teacher for thirty-seven years, she lives now on St. Simons Island, Georgia. There she was recruited by part-time neighbor George Dawes Green, founder of The Moth, to share this story. Her first time in front of the microphone was also her first visit to New York. The following is a transcript adapted from the story Bullard told live at The Moth.

I'm going to tell you a story about my dad.

His name was George Bullard. He was born in a rural area, right up the northeast corner of Mississippi that some folks call hillbilly country and they just call paradise. He grew up with eight other siblings on a farm, was married when he was twenty, had two daughters, and after his wife died, he raised them both himself. When they were grown, he married my mother, who was about twenty years younger, and they had another family. So, I'm the last of the last.

> "Mind you, my dad knew almost *nothing* about firefighting, but he knew how to encourage young men."

My dad was about fifty years old when I was born, but I was very fortunate to be raised by him. He bred and trained bird dogs all his life and that's how he made a living. If the bird-dog business got a little slow, he'd paint a house or two and other things like that, but after he got up in his sixties, someone convinced him to get into politics. He ran for Board of Aldermen, which is like the city council. Because everybody loved him, he won by a landslide, and was given the assignment of fire commissioner.

Now, all the previous fire commissioners ever did was go to meetings and make political decisions. But my father liked to get involved, so he went to the phone company and said, "Can't y'all hook up my telephone with the one in the fire department?"

So they did. Every time the fire department telephone rang, our house phone rang—one *long* continuous ring until you picked it up. Now you didn't talk, you just listened to see where the fire was so you'd know where to go. He went to all the fires day or night. Mind you, he knew almost *nothing* about firefighting, but he knew how to encourage young men. So, he'd go and encourage 'em.

When my father had stopped driving at night because of his age, I got involved. As a teenager, I had a driver's license so I'd have to keep jeans and tennis shoes right there by my bed for the three o'clock in the morning tours. Well, after a few turns as board alderman, several people, myself included, convinced him not to do it anymore. But he missed the camaraderie he had with all the firemen. And because the firemen and the police department were in the same building, he missed the policemen, too. So every now and again he would just go down there to visit.

This being a small town, they worked out something, which might not have been real legal. They taught him how to operate the police radio. And anytime anybody wanted a day off or they were sick, he'd go in and work an eight-hour shift. Somehow, they managed to pay him, but I'm not sure how . . .

READ "THE SMALL-TOWN PRISONER" IN ITS ENTIRETY AT THEMOTH.ORG/ARTOFTHESTORY

TOP: WANDA BULLARD ©DAVID POLENBERG; BELOW: COURTESY OF THE MOTH

Upcoming Events presented by The Moth

THE ART OF THE STORY

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At The Players Club
New York

MARCH 14

The Moth
in Connecticut

At Sacred Heart University
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MAY 1

The Moth Presents
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Please read this summary of information about LUNESTA before you talk to your doctor or start using LUNESTA. It is not meant to take the place of your doctor's instructions. If you have any questions about LUNESTA tablets, be sure to ask your doctor or pharmacist.

LUNESTA is used to treat different types of sleep problems, such as difficulty in falling asleep, difficulty in maintaining sleep during the night, and waking up too early in the morning. Most people with insomnia have more than one of these problems. You should take LUNESTA immediately before going to bed because of the risk of falling.

LUNESTA belongs to a group of medicines known as "hypnotics" or, simply, sleep medicines. There are many different sleep medicines available to help people sleep better. Insomnia is often transient and intermittent. It usually requires treatment for only a short time, usually 7 to 10 days up to 2 weeks. If your insomnia does not improve after 7 to 10 days of treatment, see your doctor, because it may be a sign of an underlying condition. Some people have chronic sleep problems that may require more prolonged use of sleep medicine. However, you should not use these medicines for long periods without talking with your doctor about the risks and benefits of prolonged use.

Side Effects

All medicines have side effects. The most common side effects of sleep medicines are:

- Drowsiness
- Dizziness
- Lightheadedness
- Difficulty with coordination

Sleep medicines can make you sleepy during the day. How drowsy you feel depends upon how your body reacts to the medicine, which sleep medicine you are taking, and how large a dose your doctor has prescribed. Daytime drowsiness is best avoided by taking the lowest dose possible that will still help you sleep at night. Your doctor will work with you to find the dose of LUNESTA that is best for you. Some people taking LUNESTA have reported next-day sleepiness.

To manage these side effects while you are taking this medicine:

- When you first start taking LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine, until you know whether the medicine will still have some effect on you the next day, use extreme care while doing anything that requires complete alertness, such as driving a car, operating machinery, or piloting an aircraft.
- Do not drink alcohol when you are taking LUNESTA or any sleep medicine. Alcohol can increase the side effects of LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine.
- Do not take any other medicines without asking your doctor first. This includes medicines you can buy without a prescription. Some medicines can cause drowsiness and are best avoided while taking LUNESTA.
- Always take the exact dose of LUNESTA prescribed by your doctor. Never change your dose without talking to your doctor first.

Special Concerns

There are some special problems that may occur while taking sleep medicines.

Memory Problems

Sleep medicines may cause a special type of memory loss or "amnesia." When this occurs, a person may not remember what has happened for several hours after taking the medicine. This is usually not a problem since most people fall asleep after taking the medicine. Memory loss can be a problem, however, when sleep medicines are taken while traveling, such as during an airplane flight and the person wakes up before the effect of the medicine is gone. This has been called "traveler's amnesia." Memory problems have been reported rarely by patients taking LUNESTA in clinical studies. In most cases, memory problems can be avoided if you take LUNESTA only when you are able to get a full night of sleep before you need to be active again. Be sure to talk to your doctor if you think you are having memory problems.

Tolerance

When sleep medicines are used every night for more than a few weeks, they may lose their effectiveness in helping you sleep. This is known as "tolerance." Development of tolerance to LUNESTA was not observed in a clinical study of 6 months' duration. Insomnia is often transient and intermittent, and prolonged use of sleep medicines is generally not necessary. Some people, though, have chronic sleep problems that may require more prolonged use of sleep medicine. If your sleep problems continue, consult your doctor, who will determine whether other measures are needed to overcome your sleep problems.

Dependence

Sleep medicines can cause dependence in some people, especially when these medicines are used regularly for longer than a few weeks or at high doses. Dependence is the need to continue taking a medicine because stopping it is unpleasant.

When people develop dependence, stopping the medicine suddenly may cause unpleasant symptoms (see *Withdrawal* below). They may find they have to keep taking the medicine either at the prescribed dose or at increasing doses just to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

All people taking sleep medicines have some risk of becoming dependent on the medicine. However, people who have been dependent on alcohol or other drugs in the past may have a higher chance of becoming addicted to sleep medicines. This possibility must be considered before using these medicines for more than a few weeks. If you have been addicted to alcohol or drugs in the past, it is important to tell your doctor before starting LUNESTA or any sleep medicine.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal symptoms may occur when sleep medicines are stopped suddenly after being used daily for a long time. In some cases, these symptoms can occur even if the medicine has been used for only a week or two. In mild cases, withdrawal symptoms may include unpleasant feelings. In more severe cases, abdominal and muscle cramps, vomiting, sweating, shakiness, and, rarely, seizures may occur. These more severe withdrawal symptoms are very uncommon. Although withdrawal symptoms have not been observed in the relatively limited controlled trials experience with LUNESTA, there is, nevertheless, the risk of such events in association with the use of any sleep medicine.

Another problem that may occur when sleep medicines are stopped is known as "rebound insomnia." This means that a person may have more trouble sleeping the first few nights after the medicine is stopped than before starting the medicine. If you should experience rebound insomnia, do not get discouraged. This problem usually goes away on its own after 1 or 2 nights.

If you have been taking LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine for more than 1 or 2 weeks, do not stop taking it on your own. Always follow your doctor's directions.

Changes In Behavior And Thinking

Some people using sleep medicines have experienced unusual changes in their thinking and/or behavior. These effects are not common. However, they have included:

- More outgoing or aggressive behavior than normal
- Confusion
- Strange behavior
- Agitation
- Hallucinations
- Worsening of depression
- Suicidal thoughts

How often these effects occur depends on several factors, such as a person's general health, the use of other medicines, and which sleep medicine is being used. Clinical experience with LUNESTA suggests that it is rarely associated with these behavior changes.

It is also important to realize it is rarely clear whether these behavior changes are caused by the medicine, are caused by an illness, or have occurred on their own. In fact, sleep problems that do not improve may be due to illnesses that were present before the medicine was used. If you or your family notice any changes in your behavior, or if you have any unusual or disturbing thoughts, call your doctor immediately.

Pregnancy And Breastfeeding

Sleep medicines may cause sedation or other potential effects in the unborn baby when used during the last weeks of pregnancy. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are pregnant, if you are planning to become pregnant, or if you become pregnant while taking LUNESTA.

In addition, a very small amount of LUNESTA may be present in breast milk after use of the medication. The effects of very small amounts of LUNESTA on an infant are not known; therefore, as with all other prescription sleep medicines, it is recommended that you not take LUNESTA if you are breastfeeding a baby.

Safe Use Of Sleep Medicines

To ensure the safe and effective use of LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine, you should observe the following cautions:

1. LUNESTA is a prescription medicine and should be used ONLY as directed by your doctor. Follow your doctor's instructions about how to take, when to take, and how long to take LUNESTA.
2. Never use LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine for longer than directed by your doctor.
3. If you notice any unusual and/or disturbing thoughts or behavior during treatment with LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine, contact your doctor.
4. Tell your doctor about any medicines you may be taking, including medicines you may buy without a prescription and herbal preparations. You should also tell your doctor if you drink alcohol. DO NOT use alcohol while taking LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine.
5. Do not take LUNESTA unless you are able to get 8 or more hours of sleep before you must be active again.
6. Do not increase the prescribed dose of LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine unless instructed by your doctor.
7. When you first start taking LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine, until you know whether the medicine will still have some effect on you the next day, use extreme care while doing anything that requires complete alertness, such as driving a car, operating machinery, or piloting an aircraft.
8. Be aware that you may have more sleeping problems the first night or two after stopping any sleep medicine.
9. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are pregnant, if you are planning to become pregnant, if you become pregnant, or if you are breastfeeding a baby while taking LUNESTA.
10. As with all prescription medicines, never share LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine with anyone else. Always store LUNESTA or any other sleep medicine in the original container and out of reach of children.
11. Be sure to tell your doctor if you suffer from depression.
12. LUNESTA works very quickly. You should only take LUNESTA immediately before going to bed.
13. For LUNESTA to work best, you should not take it with or immediately after a high-fat, heavy meal.
14. Some people, such as older adults (i.e., ages 65 and over) and people with liver disease, should start with the lower dose (1 mg) of LUNESTA. Your doctor may choose to start therapy at 2 mg. In general, adults under age 65 should be treated with 2 or 3 mg.
15. Each tablet is a single dose; do not crush or break the tablet.

Note: This summary provides important information about LUNESTA. If you would like more information, ask your doctor or pharmacist to let you read the Prescribing Information and then discuss it with him or her.

Rx only

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Hackney Downs Grammar School, in the mid-forties. (Brearley had also cast Pinter as Macbeth in a school production in which he got national attention—"Master Harold Pinter made a more eloquent, more obviously nerve-racked Macbeth than one or two professional grown-ups I have seen in the part of late years," Alan Dent wrote in the *News Chronicle.*) Brearley had been adopted as an honorary paternal member of Pinter's close-knit gang of friends, whose competitive camaraderie played a crucial part in his coming-of-age, and he happened to be visiting Pinter in Sussex. "I gave him the play to read," Pinter recalled. "I waited in another room. About two hours later, I heard the front door slam. I thought, Well, here we are. He doesn't like it. About an hour later, the doorbell rang. I answered it. He said, 'I had to get some air.' He said, 'It is your best.'"

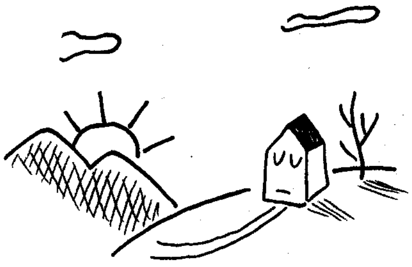
Pinter, on some level, agrees. "I think it's the most muscular thing I've written," he told me. "I delight and relish in language. I certainly did with 'The Homecoming' to an extent that I probably haven't done in any other play." Pinter, who wrote poetry long before he attempted a play, creates drama like a poem, working entirely out of the unconscious. He starts with an image or a phrase; he teases it out, listening and rearranging until the words suggest a character and the character suggests an action. In an early note for "The Homecoming," he scrawled the word "jealousy." Beside it, like a sort of rhyme scheme, he wrote:

A of B and C
C of B and A
B of A and C

When the characters finally arrive on the page, Pinter knows no more than what they tell him. As he told a group of drama students in 1962, "You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said." In this sense, Pinter took the actor's understanding of subtext and turned it into a metaphysic. This discovery allowed him to distill and reconfigure the inspiration of Samuel Beckett—he was reading Beckett from 1950 on—into his own distinctive rhythmical, alliterative idiom, which made a drama of utterance, not explanation, and where the appearance of reality was an uncompromising dissection of the unknown. Mamet, speaking of Pinter and Beckett, said, "They did what few dramatists have done in modern times: they construed the drama not as the interplay of ideas but as the interplay of *sounds*. That is, they understood the drama as a poem, which had the capacity to move, as does a real poem, musically—to affect on a pre-rational level."

"Over the previous ten years, there'd been quite a lot of talk about the regeneration of theatre in poetic terms—Eliot, Fry, Auden," Hall told me. "Harold seemed to me to encompass all that and more. He should be seen as a poetic dramatist. It's the use of words in an extremely disciplined, contained way. It uses, in fact, all the time-honored devices of rhetoric, but it doesn't parade them. Harold didn't want something that made a statement, because a statement was lacking in ambiguity." After years of performing thrillers and melodramas in repertory, Pinter also wanted, he said, "nothing from the bargain basement" of boulevard entertainment.

For "The Homecoming," he began with a sentence, the play's opening words: "What have you done with the scissors?" "I didn't know who was saying it," he said. "I didn't know who he was talking to. Now, the fellow he was talking to—if he had said, 'Oh, I've got them right here, Dad,' there would have been no play. But instead he says, 'Why don't you shut up, you daft prat?' Once that's said, there's a spring of drama, which develops and follows its own course. I had no idea what the course was going to be. I hadn't planned anything. In the back of my mind, I think I knew there was another brother going to come back. I think I saw them quite early in a big house, with the doors being taken down, leading to a stairway. I saw them moving in that space."



"An old house in North London": "The Homecoming"'s first stage direction situates the play both in an internal landscape and in the atmosphere and the idiom of Pinter's Hackney youth. "It's all to do with me in some way or another," he said in a television interview in 1965. "You're not consciously looking back to Hackney, to the life, the values, the threats. Not at all. . . . But it's a world related to you, otherwise you wouldn't write it." The play's dialogue, a kind of constant face-off between characters, is lifted from the Cockney lingua franca with which Pinter and his mates used to tease each other, as well as the local fascists who bullied them. "We'd go into one of their cafés and say, 'Cup of tea and a sort-out, please,'" Pinter's longstanding friend the actor Henry Woolf told me. "We had a few encounters. I've seen Harold hold off a whole mob of them."

Even then, among his friends, Pinter was a pathfinder. "He was extremely adventurous," Woolf said. "I must give him credit for that. We were just beginning to trot, and he was galloping. Socially, sexually, he was precocious. He was sniffing around London." In "The Homecoming," the characters also bowl around London—the docks, the West End, Eaton Square, Wormwood Scrubs. Like the claustrophobic dereliction of Max's house, Hackney was, for Pinter, "a kind of prison." In time, that oppressiveness fuelled a group exodus. One of Pinter's closest friends, Morris (Moishe) Wernick, having secretly married, immigrated to Canada, where he taught high-school history; eight years later, in 1964—just before "The Homecoming" was written—Wernick returned for the first time to introduce his wife and his children to his father. That situation was Pinter's springboard. Max was also fabricated partly from Pinter's Wernick-family memories. "The image of Moishe's father in cap and plimsolls was one I carried with me," he told Michael Billington. "I knew him to be a pretty authoritarian figure. A really tough old bugger." When Woolf saw the play, he called the resemblance "otherworldly." "Harold had captured the tone of the voice and

"Been there, drunk that."

• •

the environment," he said. "There was just the same sniff in the kitchens of the two houses."

The success of "The Homecoming" catapulted Pinter into an unmooring few years. In 1964, he moved Merchant and their son into an imposing six-story town house on Hanover Terrace, overlooking Regent's Park. "Nobody just rings the door and comes in," he said. Antonia Fraser told Billington, "It was the grandest house I've ever been in. . . . Every room was immaculate with this terrible silence." As Pinter's circumstances changed, so did his plays. They became smaller in scale, more internal, more mannered and abstract. (Only in his late masterpiece "Moonlight," of 1993, did Pinter provide a metaphor as searing and complete as in "The Homecoming.") Increasingly cut off by his celebrity from the roiling world that had made him, Pinter soon hit an impasse. "I am writing nothing and can write nothing," he said, while accepting the Shakespeare Prize, in 1970. "I don't know why. It's a very bad feeling, I know that, but I must say I want more than anything else to fill up a blank page again, and to feel that strange thing happen, birth through fingertips." He added, "When you can't write, you feel you've been banished from yourself."

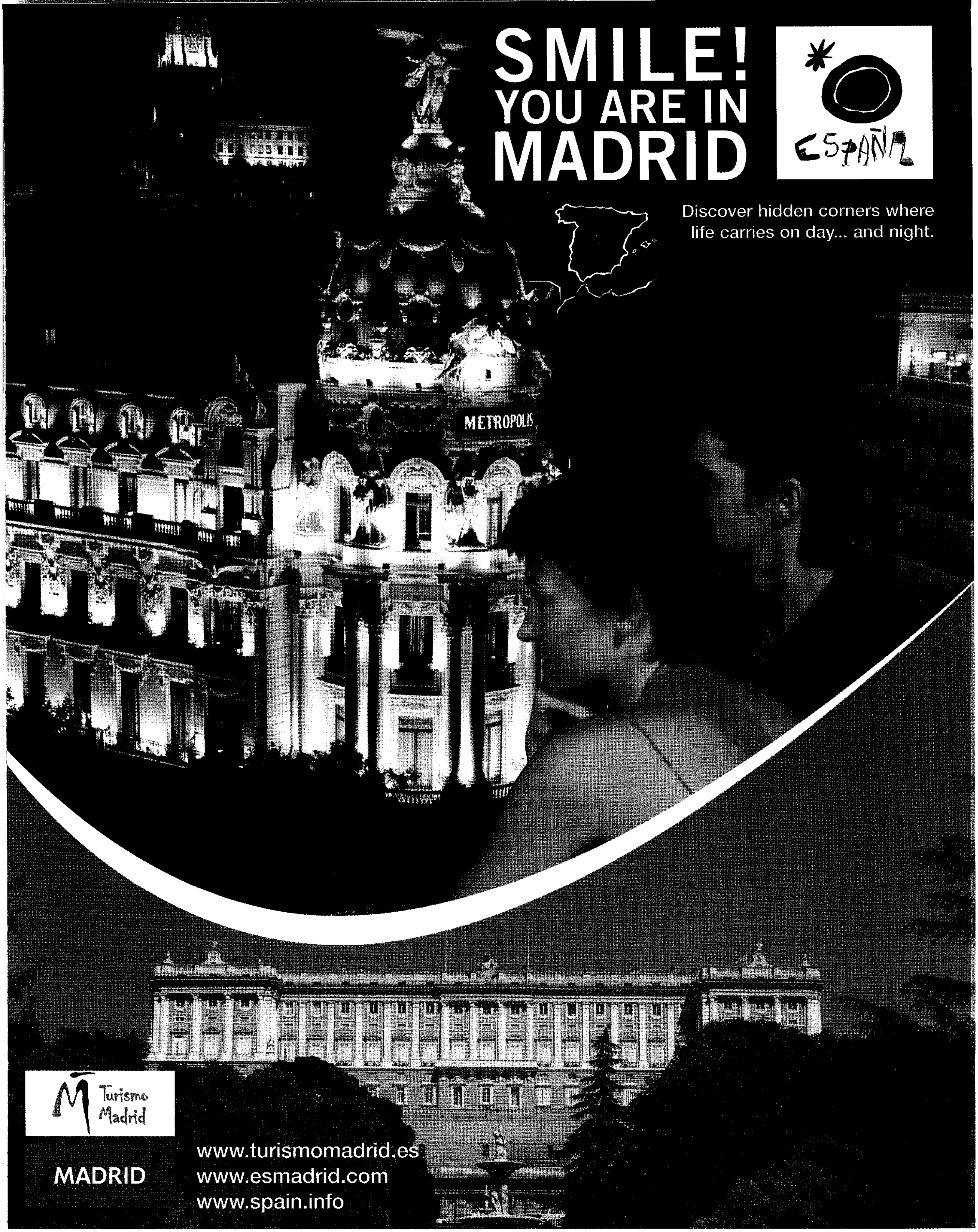
Pinter waited out his unconscious by hiring himself out as a director and screenwriter between plays. The screenplays—including "The Quiller Memorandum," "The Go-Between," "Accident," and "Langrishe, Go Down"—allowed him to practice his craft and bide his time until his own characters returned.

In the forty years since the début of "The Homecoming" on Broadway (it received a lukewarm critical reception before becoming a cause célèbre), the play has gone from controversy to classic. As one of drama's preëminent stylists, Pinter has had the good fortune to live long enough to instruct other theatricals about his idiom and to have enjoyed a number of first-rate productions of his work. In the beginning, "The Homecoming" was a vexing avant-garde conundrum; now it's essential reading on every modern-theatre syllabus. Time has made the audience and the actors more aware of Pinter's game; this relaxation allows for a greater appreciation of the gusto of his humor, as well as of his intellectual daring. Among the many pleasures of the current Broadway revival—a fine ensemble, adroit playing, limpid interpretation—the most piquant is the revelation that the play is profoundly funny.

Laughter can excuse many things; here, it triumphs over Eugene Lee's misjudged set, which sits like a lean-to in the middle of the Cort's wide stage, flanked on either side by flats designed to look like shiny black brick walls—which have neither the whiff of authenticity nor the appropriate atmosphere of collapse. This incongruity is not as bothersome, however, as the set's lack of containment—there are no sidewalls—which allows the psychic pressure of the jousting to dissipate somewhat. "What do you think of the room? Big, isn't it?" Teddy (the excellent James Frain) says, when he introduces Ruth (Eve Best) to the place. The line is startling not because the room is vast but because it isn't. From the tattered hallway wallpaper and the exposed beams above the living room's threshold, it's clear that Max's house is dilapidated; however, it is still, to my eyes at least, overdecorated, with a colored pitcher and glasses, a mirror, Joey's dumbbells visible under a record-player. The set does little to enhance the play's minimalist resonances, but at least it doesn't impede the nuance of Pinter's language, which like all great poetry yields up more insight with each viewing.

There are many tasty interpretations here—the punishing punctilio of Michael McKean's Sam, the lapdog loneliness of Gareth Saxe's Joey—but Eve Best's Ruth is the most revelatory. The original Ruth—Pinter's first wife, Vivien Merchant—was memorable but arch. Best is soft and accessible, which makes Ruth's battened-down alienation all the more exciting. At one point in Act II, Ruth, perched on the arm of a chair, looking into the middle distance, and holding a cup of coffee, begins to tell Max about her past. "I was . . . different . . . when I met Teddy . . . first." "No, you weren't," Teddy says. "You were the same." Teddy refuses to see Ruth as she is. Best turns her head away; her cup chinks against the saucer. The sound, like that of a stone dropped into a well, registers the depth of the distance between them.

Best's articulate energy raises Frain's game. His Teddy unearths from the script's buried treasures something new to me: he makes us see the ruthlessness of Teddy's indifference. Teddy doesn't give a damn about Ruth. ("You can help me with my lectures when we get back,"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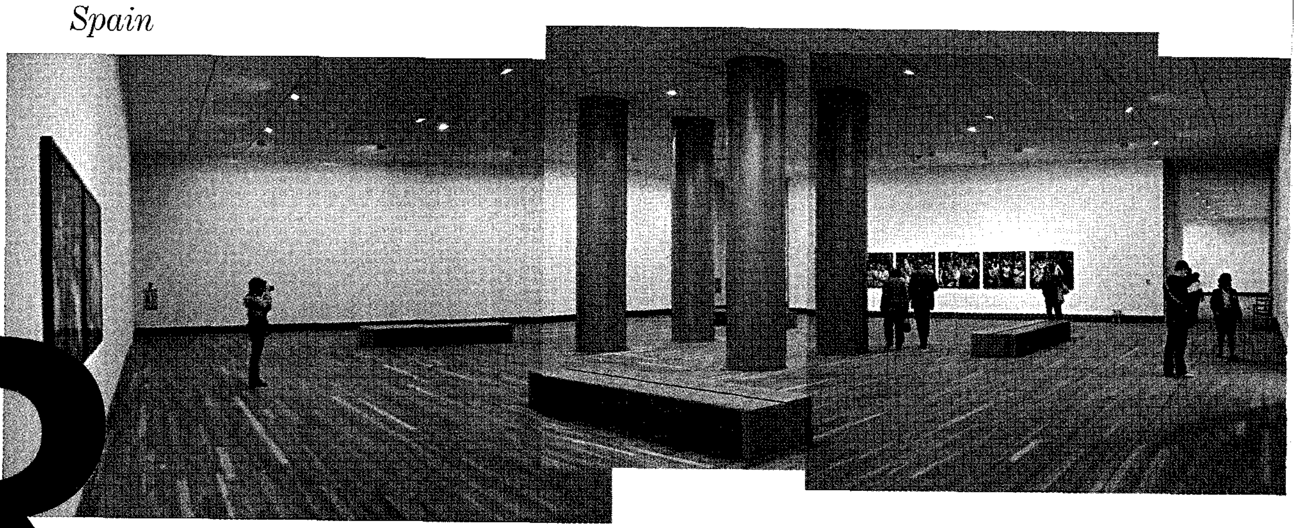

R*el in Madrid*

Spain's lively, cosmopolitan capital has a well-earned reputation for offering some of Europe's best night life and cuisine. Revelers from around the world come to celebrate in style at the city's avant-garde dance clubs, intimate bars, chic restaurants, and romantic cafés.

The customary way to kick off an evening is with cocktails and tapas, small dishes of olives, cheese, sausages, and other specialties that sate the appetite before notoriously nocturnal Madrileños eat dinner. Some of Madrid's most popular tapas restaurants are along Calle Cava Baja just south of the Plaza Mayor, where **Taberna Tempranillo** serves these typical treats. **El Bocaíto** in the bohemian Chueca neighborhood is another favorite destination on the tapeo—a multi-stop tapas feast.

After barhopping, friends meet for a leisurely dinner, often not until after 9 P.M. Choosing a restaurant may be one of the tougher decisions of the evening, but a few notable options are **La Broche**, which offers a creative twist on Catalan cooking, **El Amparo**, a Basque favorite, and **Viejo Madrid**, known for its traditional Spanish cuisine.

Besides its vibrant dining scene, Madrid offers a wide range of cultural activities. The prestigious **Teatro Real** hosts concerts and operas throughout the year, and **La Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas**, Madrid's legendary bullring, is also a popular venue for rock concerts and shows.

As dinner winds down and performances end, the citywide party moves into high gear. Crowds gather at clubs around midnight, and everyone dresses up to dance until dawn—locals rarely wear jeans or sneakers to bars and clubs. The grand finale to a night on the town is the typical breakfast ritual: thick, hot chocolate and sweet, fried *churros*.

By day, Madrid has exceptional museums to explore. This fall, the **Prado Museum** unveiled its grand new extension, nearly doubling its size. Designed by architect Rafael Moneo, the enlarged Prado features new galleries and even additional buildings that have been incorporated into the museum, including the restored Cloister of the Jerónimos. The Prado is inaugurating the new space with an exhibition featuring nineteenth-century Spanish artists such as Goya, Madrazo, and Sorolla, on view through April 24th.

Also along the Paseo del Prado, the **Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum** has two of the top private collections of twentieth-century art, with works by Titian, Kandinsky, and Rothko among other museum highlights. Completing Madrid's "Golden Triangle of Art," the **Reina Sofia National Art Museum** specializes in Spanish works—Picasso's "Guernica" is part of the permanent collection. Day or night, visitors can revel in the treasures of this multicultural city.

PHOTOS: NEW EXTENSION OF THE PRADO MUSEUM ©ARQTIPO
WINTER TOMATOES ©TSUKASA SHIMMYO

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España

he says, by way of trying to lure her home to their American life.) Just as Teddy comes downstairs with their bags packed, Lenny (Raúl Esparza) asks Ruth for a dance. They sway together to a moody tune, then they kiss. As Best pulls out of the embrace, her head tilts back as if she were gulping water after a long thirst. The moment is terrific. Ruth's desire is finally both acknowledged and answered. Because Best is able to chart this emotional desert with such depth and precision, Ruth's final line to Teddy as he leaves—"Don't become a stranger"—illuminates the enormity of her perverse revenge, at once devastating and tormenting.

Ian McShane, as Max, knows the Pinter terrain well; he gets all the music he can out of Max's scatological rants. Max's vituperative gas, as McShane deftly demonstrates, is a coverup for his sexual inadequacy. McShane's biggest acting challenge—he's a handsome, virile sixty-five—is to make the audience believe in both Max's age and his impotence. McShane pulls it off, but some padding in his costume and some cumbersome weight on the cane that he brandishes with a majorette's aplomb wouldn't go amiss.

"I've stopped writing plays," Pinter told me, as our conversation was drawing to a close. "I'm weary." The previous week, he'd gone to the hospital for a brain scan. "You know what you'll find in there," he had told the lab technician. "A lot of unwritten plays." I asked him if writing required a ferocity that he no longer had. Pinter smiled wanly. "I still have quite a bit of ferocity knocking around," he said. "It's how to embody it."

Pinter's literary strength—his easy access to his own turbulent internal climate—has also been his public weakness. The press, which has consistently berated him for what it portrays as his vainglorious diatribes, has never quite understood that his arrogance is the flip side of his brilliance; you couldn't have the big artist without the big mouth. "I'm well aware that I have been described in some quarters as being 'enigmatic, taciturn, terse, prickly, explosive and forbidding,'" Pinter said in 1995. "Well, I do have my moods, like anyone else." To call Pinter's outbursts "moods" is like calling a tsunami a wave. Pinter, like his characters, is porous; bellicosity is the firewall that he has built against threats to his interior, whether from people or ideas. On the page, his volatility has made art; in life, all too frequently, it makes headlines. It can be argued that Pinter's dramas, with their undermining of authority and their dissection of the power plays in group dynamics, are essentially political. (The 1984 play "One for the Road" and 1988's "Mountain Language," among others, are specifically political plays.) In the last twenty years, as the gaps between plays have grown longer, Pinter has channelled some of his anger onto the world stage. Nothing if not unpredictable—he voted for Margaret Thatcher in 1979 ("the most shameful act of my life," he later said)—he has lent the muscle of his voice to a variety of causes, among them the Sandinistas, the freedom of Slobodan Milosevic, the end of the Iraq war, and the trial of Tony Blair as a war criminal. But his preëminent target is American foreign policy. "The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them," Pinter said in his Nobel speech. In the rhetorical fulminations of his political poetry, he has aspired to smash through America's self-portrayal "as a force for universal good." "American Football," a salvo against the 1991 Gulf War, ends almost as "The Homecoming" does:

> We blew their balls into shards of dust,
> Into shards of fucking dust.
>
> We did it.
>
> Now I want you to come over here and
> kiss me on the mouth.

For such outcries, Pinter has found himself both lambasted and lampooned. But, since the conferring of the Nobel, and since the fiasco of the current Iraq war has borne out some of Pinter's dire warnings, the tabloid teasing has diminished, though not Pinter's attitude toward it. "Fuck the press," he told me, leaning slowly forward. "That is exactly what I felt then, even more so what I feel now." He paused. "They can just go fuck themselves," he said. ♦

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John Lahr talks about Harold Pinter.

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FICTION

NATALIE

BY ANNE ENRIGHT

THIERRY BOUET, "BALL LOUIS XIV" (2003)

So Natalie put me straight. Who knows what Natalie wants or what she likes, but we know what she doesn't like, that's for sure. At least we do now.

"Well," I said, after I put the phone down, "I won't be getting in your way again."

Natalie should be a star. When she grows up, that is. Natalie should be something really impressive. Because if she isn't, then it'll get pretty lonely, won't it? I mean, how many friends has she got to lose?

I am going to be a writer when I grow up, and I am going to put it all down on the page—this tangle between Natalie and me, which is supposed to be about Billy's mother, though I don't think it is, really. Billy is Natalie's boyfriend. I nearly went out with him once, but that was so long ago, and it wasn't even a proper thing. Now he's best friends with my boyfriend, who couldn't care less, and neither could Natalie, so that isn't what this is about, either.

I wake up in the middle of the night I am so upset. I mean, when I put down the phone I didn't know what to think—Natalie is so polite, you could hardly call what we had a *fight*—but six hours later I'm lying with my eyes wide open, looking at what turns out to be the ceiling (duh!), wondering what terrible thought just woke me up.

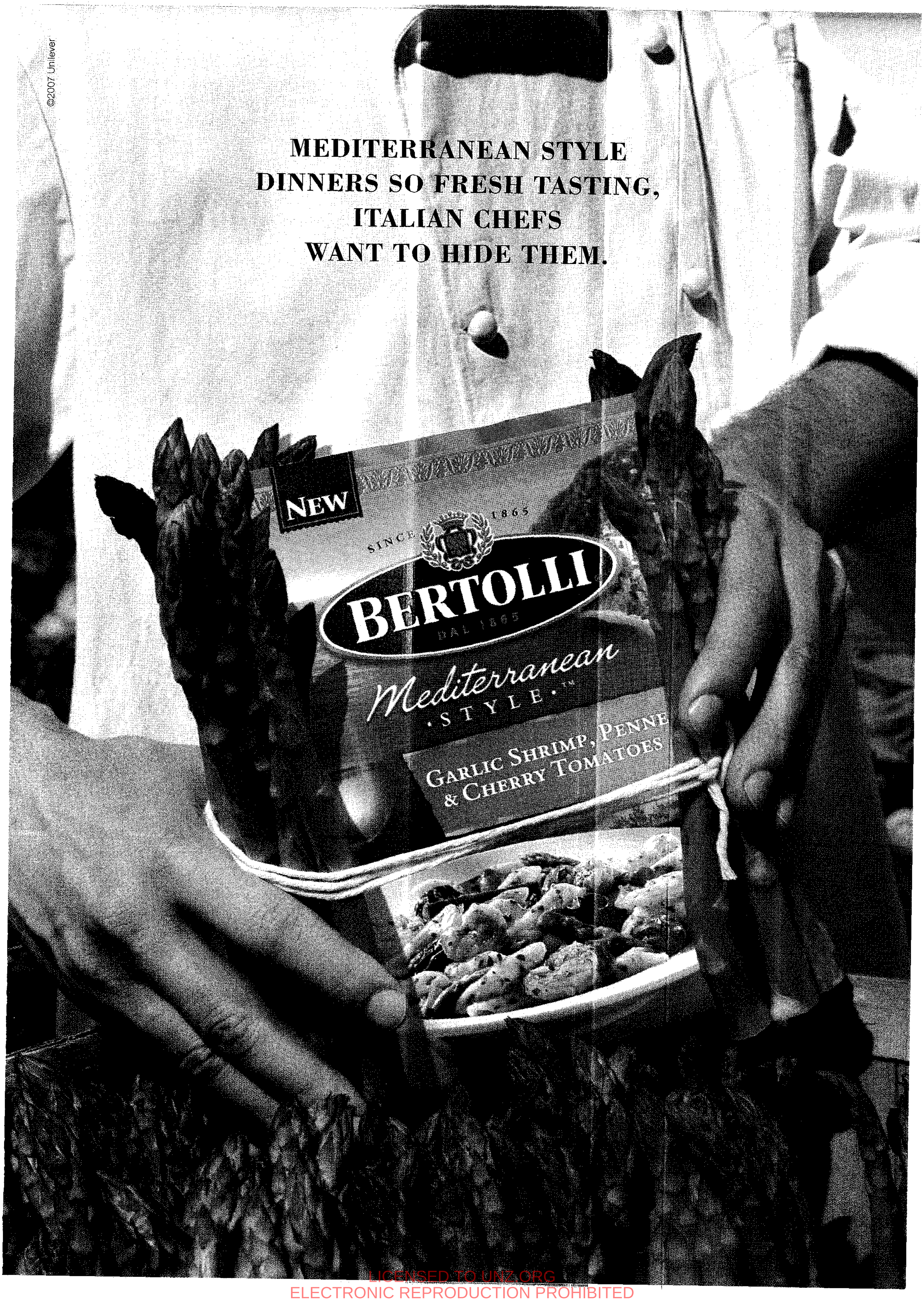
My sister is asleep across the room. She has a kind of glowing-pebble night-light that changes colors very slowly, and she is lying in this sea of stuff: books and broken Nintendos and inflatable Bratz cushions and God knows what else—except, from somewhere deep inside the heap, her breathing. And it makes me think of the milk inside a coconut, and also of Natalie's room, which I was in once, and it was really tidy. That's all. It was just really tidy.

Natalie is an only child. She says it's O.K. She says she doesn't know if her parents really, really love her or really, really couldn't care less. She has nothing to compare them with. They never shout at her, they just have "little conversations"—which sounds like hell to me, but she says it's O.K.

Here are the four of us—we all grew up in the same boring suburb of Dublin: I am the fat, jokey one with the flaking nail polish, though it is always interesting flaking polish, like mirror silver or navy blue. Still, you can tell by the way the stuff jumps off me that I don't really mean it. Natalie is more a Rouge Noir sort of girl. She might have her doubts, but that polish stays put.

Natalie has the kind of looks you have to get used to, but, once you do, it is like you have personally discovered them. Her features are sort of see-through, her skin is really pale, and she has thin white-blond hair—this is why I say she should be a star, because the camera loves all that, close up. She hasn't got a single open pore. Though she does need to get her eyelashes dyed professionally—she did it herself once, and the edges of her eyelids went pink and she had to stop using anything for a while, which made her look sort of blinky and peeved.

When I say I am fat—even though, statistically speaking, I'm an eight-and-a-quarter-stone *midget*—my boyfriend says that I am not actually fat, I am just sleek. So that's the new word for fat—"sleek." But before I go completely self-hating I do actually like my hair, which is black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and really glossy, especially when it's, like, totally saturated with grease.

Who else?

Billy is a lot of trouble, and I like him a lot. Hey, I like trouble. Or so I say to my boyfriend when he rolls his eyes the way he does. Billy has the kind of looks I used to go for a couple of years ago, when I was about fifteen: soulful and soft, with absolutely no hair on his chest.

Billy is my boyfriend's best friend. I say that, but I don't think my boyfriend has a best friend, actually. So maybe that's the real question—who knows what my boyfriend wants, or who he likes? Does he even like me? It's a mystery.

I am so in love with my boyfriend—that much I know. He has eyes like George Clooney and beautiful hands. At least the backs of them are beautiful; the palms are a bit dry and shattered-looking. I tried to get him to use some cream, but that's like trying to put him in a tutu, as far as he is concerned. I literally had to chase him around the room, and he ended up pushing my hand with the cream on it all over my face, even though it is hand cream and like lard, basically.

My boyfriend has his own room, and his parents gave him a gas heater to help him study in there, and I don't know if it was the smell of the gas or the heat of it that made us feel so fuggy all last winter. We did a lot of kissing in front of that heater, and, yes, we have gone all the way—but that's only when his parents are out, which, these days, is never. But I don't mind. We kiss until we are dizzy, and my boyfriend is just so gorgeous and gentle about it. We tried to go further in the park one time, but it was freezing and dark and I didn't find it sexy at all; in fact, I think it made me a bit upset. (I am not saying that I am leaving my boyfriend mad with lust—I am not that sort of person. And, actually, that's all I am going to say about that.)

The school dance was on Friday evening, and I'm still getting flashbacks. It's like a nightmare—that guy getting sick over my shoulder, and Natalie smiling like some kind of nun. She was like a nun on the phone tonight, too, saying, "I thought I'd leave you to recover." But I am not even thinking about all this, as I lie here in the changing pink light. I'm not even thinking that she has Botoxed her emotions so she won't ever need to do her face. I am thinking, *It is something else again.*

It all started with Billy's Terrible Time last year, just a little while after he hooked up with Natalie. And we were all delighted that he had her, because she is like a flame in the daylight—that's what I think—unwavering, you can hardly see her, but she is always there. And after that mad bitch and, excuse me, cocktease Peony Mulvey we were really glad he had someone sane. Natalie is, above all things, sane.

In the middle of the night I think, *Maybe she's not sane at all.*

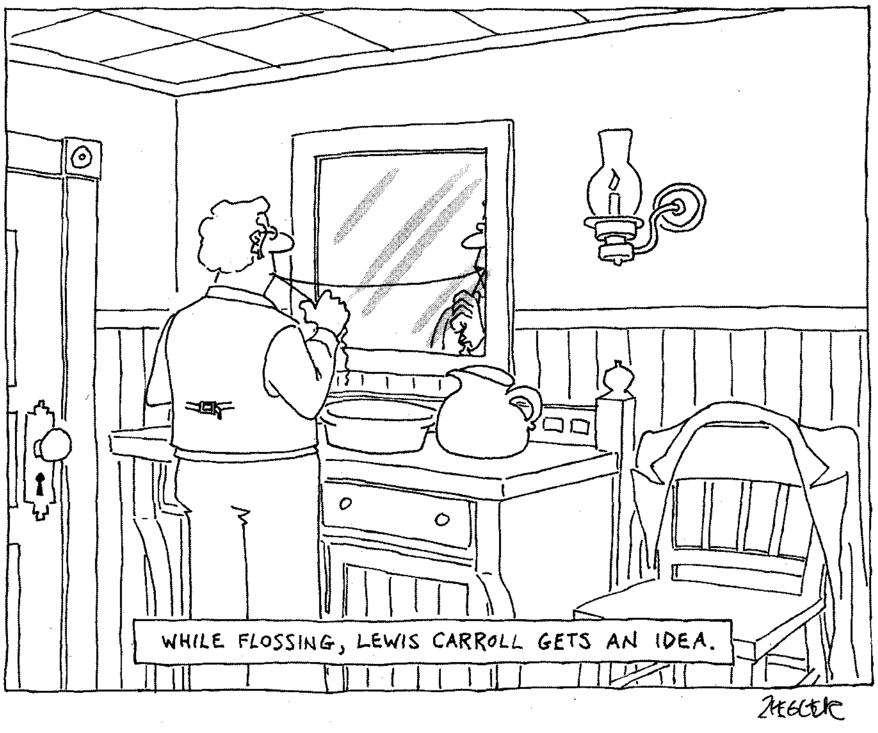
Anyway.

Billy's mother (who I really like, actually) got cancer last September, and she came home from her first chemo session high as a kite from the steroids, and she told Billy—told the whole family, in fact—that she didn't love his father anymore, had never loved him in the first place, and that once her chemo was over then her marriage was, too. It was, like, "I'm alive! I'm alive! I'm not going to waste my life anymore!!!" At least, that's how Billy described it. Then all her hair fell out, and she was sick as a parrot, and Billy's looking at his da and his da is looking at him—and, you know, there is nothing wrong with Billy's da, he's a genuinely lovely man—and he is bringing her four hundred cups of green tea a day while she lies on the sofa with a face on her that says, *As soon as this is done, then I am out that door.*

The minute we hear the diagnosis, my boyfriend gets online. He says ovarian cancer is a complete doozy—and who's going to tell Billy? Like, who is going to tell him that her percentages are basically on the floor? We are sitting in the chipper one day, waiting for Billy to get off the phone to his mother—she is in for maybe her third chemo session, and he is outside the plate-glass window trying to get good reception—and his face looks so difficult, so old and childish at the same time, that the sight of him is like a pain for each of us. It is like each of us has a pain in our side.

Then Natalie says, "Fuck the statistics. You just have to be in the right per cent. That's all. You just have to be in the per cent that survives." And I understand that she's a bit defensive—I mean, she is literally defending her new boyfriend's peace of mind here—but another part of me thinks that she is also marking her territory, which I completely respect, except that I've known Billy's mother for five years, and if she dies I, too, will cry.

His mother, incidentally, is what made Billy bonkers—long before she got sick, his mother was what made Billy interesting and unhappy—so she's a bit of a bitch, too, but I don't say that to Natalie.



WHILE FLOSSING, LEWIS CARROLL GETS AN IDEA.

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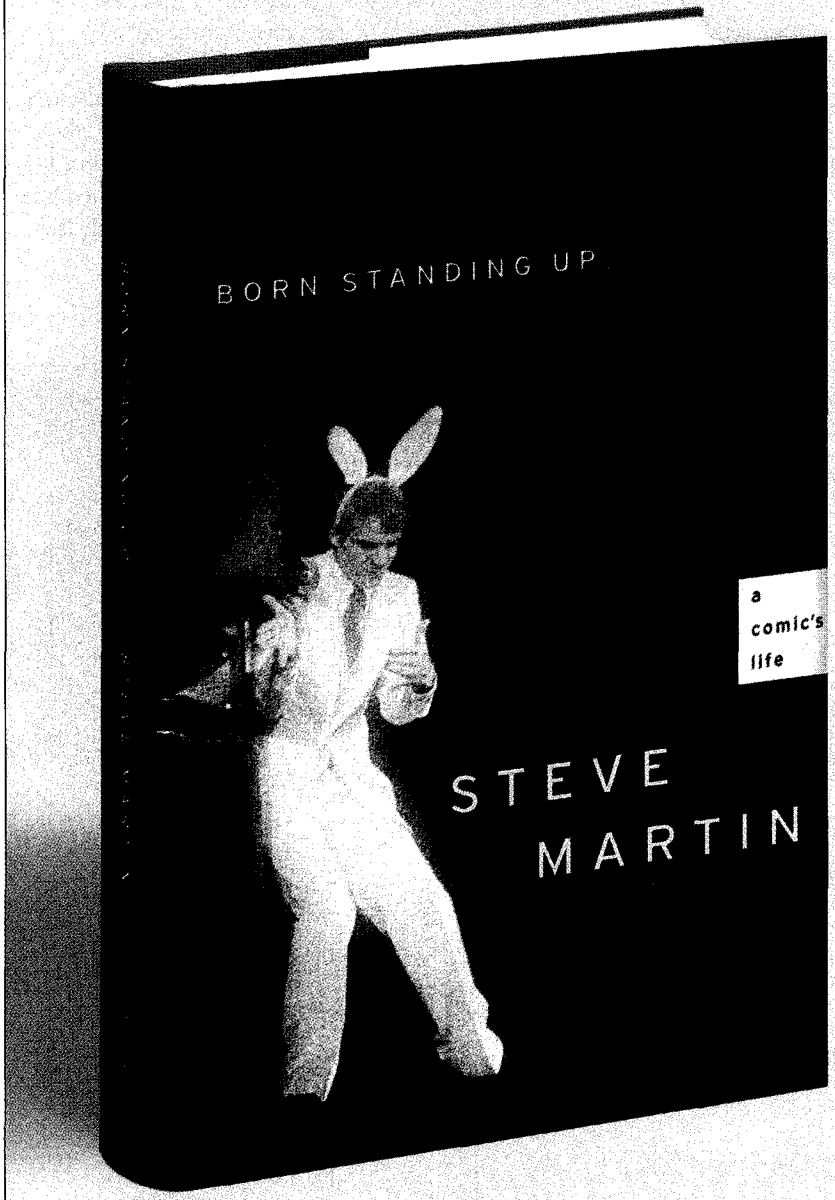

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I say, "You think she's going to survive?"

"I think," Natalie says, after a minute, "that we don't know. And, until we do know, then there's not much point getting in a fizz."

Which is so like something my boyfriend would say that I think they'd be better off with each other, really. They could roll their eyes up to heaven and not get in a fizz together—while having sex, for example. And, afterward, Natalie could make tea.

So, all the way back to his place, I accuse my boyfriend of fancying her, but this is just to get him going, just to clear out the memory of Billy coming back in after the phone call, saying, "No, no, just her usual self," and pushing his chips away. It is also to distract me from the fact that Natalie's "Don't get in a fizz" is not actually a reasonable, considered sort of thing to say—that what she is really telling me is *You don't own Billy's mother. Dead or alive.*

It was only a tiny moment, you know?

As I say, I really did respect Natalie for holding the line. And somehow, through that long winter, we all seemed to feel that if Natalie didn't flicker, if she didn't blink, and if we all stayed nice, and stayed separate, and had emotions that were appropriate to our actual situation vis-à-vis Billy's mother, then Billy's mother would survive.

I just thought, *What a great sense of decorum Natalie has.* And God knows there's not much of that around. And I really admired her, that's all. I began to see how beautiful she was close up, and I started asking her advice on chip-proof nail polish, even though these things don't ever interest me as much as I think they do. And that makes it worse, the fact that I don't give a fuck about Rouge Noir, really, so a sort of wheedling, messy thing starts to happen when we talk, and it is a while before I realize that what I want is for Natalie to *be my friend.*

I say this to my boyfriend, and he says, "She is your friend," which just shows how much he knows about these things. And after a while she does start to like us, though it's not like she has much choice. It can't have been easy: her boyfriend mad with worry, and his mother lying on the sofa, and me gabbling on about someday, maybe, getting my legs waxed—I mean, Natalie just does things, she doesn't talk about them first, and it seems like all those months were about getting nothing done at all.

Then, in the spring, Billy's mother gets her hair back, and it has this amazing red glow, like when she was a child, so we are all in and out of Billy's kitchen again, returned from our months as refugees in the chipper, and Billy's mother stays married, and she also stays as crazy as she ever was, and also superbly happy, and I just admire her so much for all of this. The next few months are a blur for Billy and my boyfriend, because they both have their last exams, so Natalie and I hang out a little, and the thing about Natalie is she is a really nice person. It's like I'm making her out to be some kind of bitch or something, but she really isn't. She is actually very cool, and nice.

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In the summer, my boyfriend gets a job in the local garage, so his clothes smell of petrol and his hands smell of money. The guy who owns the place won't put soap in the toilets, even though they serve coffees there as well. I say why doesn't he take his own soap in, but my boyfriend just looks at me like I'm trying to turn him into a queer.

He is saving for college. He is going to do Engineering, and even though it is only a bus ride away, I know that I will lose him when he goes. So I go on the strictest possible diet, and I am talking non-stop to Natalie about *the dress*—the one that I will wear to the school dance. I mean, I know my boyfriend loves me, but I will wear this dress and he will take one look at me and realize what he stands to lose. All this.

Billy's going to the local uni, too. He got accepted into two colleges in England, but I don't think that his family has the money, really, and with his mother still in remission he wants to stay close to home. September is Billy and Natalie's first anniversary, and it is also the anniversary of his mother's diagnosis, and the month of our last dance, before the boys go off forevermore. But I feel so grateful for the turn of the leaves, somehow. I walk through the little park and remember where we nearly did it one time, my boyfriend and me, and I think that—a bit like Billy's mother—when we go, we will go down swinging.

I'm texting Natalie one day and she idly mentions that she has her dress already—"White! white! white!" And it takes me about two years to spell out "Very Renée Zellweger!!!"

Eventually, I have to bring my little sister in to town with me, which feels like a sad bastard thing to do, but the thing is she's a demon when it comes to clothes—it's like bringing the entire lineup of a girl band. Between us, we solve everything with a sub-Westwood, sub-goth bustier and my mother's long silk skirt, and a gorgeous secondhand—or should I say vintage?—lamé shawl.

Billy's mother says we should go over to their house before the dance so she can frisk us down for naggins of whiskey, and besides, she says, she wants to see me in all my finery. And I say, "Mrs. Casey, I can't even take the smell of whiskey—vodka's the only way to go."

So when Natalie rings I ask her to bring her hair straightener, and she says, "Like, it's sort of large."

"Not to the dance," I say. "Just over to Billy's before we go."

"Uh . . . O.K.," she says, like "whatever." So I turn up at Billy's with everything in a huge bag, and Billy's father answers the door.

I don't know where I got it from, this idea that we were going to do it all there: the fake tan and the fake eyelashes and the bow ties and the zips. When I text Natalie, she just comes back with "???!!?," and Billy's da looks a bit embarrassed, because not even Billy is home. He shows me upstairs into his own bedroom, which is a funny place to be, and I sit at Billy's mother's dressing table,

say, "call office"
say, "shuffle on"

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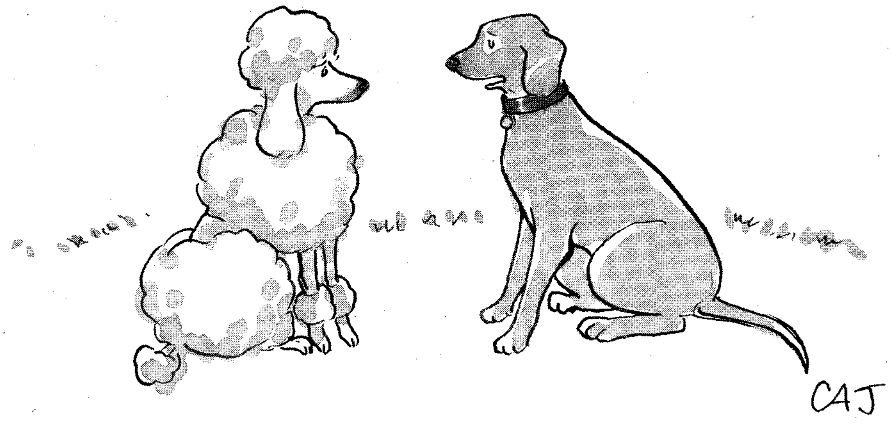

"It's not you, babe—I've been neutered."

which is a sort of alcove in the fitted wardrobe, and I look at Billy's mother's stuff: lipsticks gone off, and pressed powder with one of those pads that look sort of orthopedic, and industrial-strength night cream. And I know that I have to skip the tan, for a start—there's no one to do my back. I get a really glossy face on, and then I just sit there, looking at myself in Mrs. Casey's mirror. After a while, there's nothing for it except to put on the damn dress. Then I sit on Billy's parents' bed and look at the wallpaper. The bed isn't made. The sheets are a moss green. I lie down for a moment—just for two seconds, I lie down. Then suddenly everyone's arriving, so I jump up and stuff all the gear into my bag, and I make my grand entrance, sweeping down the stairs and into the hall.

Natalie jigs up and down and screams, and she hugs me from four feet away, so as not to muss. Then we go into Billy's front room, and his father takes a picture, and then she's there—Mrs. Casey. I was wondering what the silence in the house was all about, but there she is, flattened against the wall. Actually, first she swung into the room like a broken gate, holding the door frame with one hand and slamming the other one flat against the wall. Then she went rigid, and looked to the left, like someone was after her and they were in the hall.

"Hi, Mrs. Casey," I say.

She's really drunk.

"Hiiiii," she says.

"What do you think?" I do a pathetic little twirl, and she lowers her head at me and gives a sort of grunt of approval. Then she swings her head around to find Natalie.

She looks at Natalie's dress.

"Hnnnn," she says. Which, actually, the way it comes out of her, is quite a friendly and ironic sound. It's a "White? Interesting choice!" sort of sound. But Natalie just stares at her.

Then Natalie picks up her white skirt with her Rouge Noir nails and calls out "Billy!" like he's a dog or something. She doesn't look to the left or the right. She puts that nun's smile on her face, walks past Mrs. Casey, and keeps walking until she is out the front door.

"People die." That's what Natalie said to me on the phone tonight. Because of course we had a big surge when we got to the damn dance, and the boys got really trashed—at least, I got really trashed, so I assume the boys did, too. And I ended up snogging—not Billy, thank Christ—but someone else altogether. There's a little splash of puke on the back of my mother's silk skirt, and I'm pretty sure that the guy got sick over my shoulder, and Natalie must've heard it in my voice on the phone, the way I blame her for all this, because when she picked up her white skirt and walked past Mrs. Casey something broke. Something between the four of us broke, for good.

"And, anyway, she's not dying," said Natalie, who has no intention of dying, ever. "She was just drunk." Which is true.

Like we weren't drunk?

Which I didn't think of saying, at the time. I think of saying it now, though—in the middle of the night, when I've just woken up in a sweat of pure shame. Apart from anything else, it's so *gay*—this trailer fantasy I had of me and Natalie swapping mascara and spraying each other's hair and fixing the boys' ties; and Mrs. Casey, downstairs, being tough and smart about my dress, giving me a tough, smart kiss on the cheek before we go. And it's a while before I realize that (a) it isn't hair spray that makes you gay, it's sex that makes you gay, and (b) I don't even like hair spray.

So that's all right, then.

For a while I just lie there and let all the little moments fly round in my head. Like, months ago, in the chipper, when Natalie said, "There is no point getting in a fizz."

And I think that Billy's mother will live or die whether or not we get in a fizz. So I say, *Fizz away*. You might as well play it as it feels, *Natalie*.

My sister's night-light thinks about shifting from blue to lilac, and then seems to change its mind. What do I tell her, precocious brat that she is at the age of twelve and a half?

We are not connected.

Because this is what Natalie is saying, isn't it? That we are alone. That there is no connection between me and her, or between Billy and me, or between any of us and Mrs. Casey, who might live or who might actually die. Between human beings.

And of course she isn't saying this at all.

I mean, I will still hang out with Natalie. And I know I'll get to like her in some different way—probably her way, whatever that is. And I know the thing I have for my boyfriend isn't love, it's just a stupid kind of bliss. I know all these things—they're not what woke me up. What woke me was a feeling like a horror film, except really boring.

It was the sheets. When I lay down, just for a second, on Mr. and Mrs. Casey's moss-green sheets. Before the dance, when I was all dolled up in my silk skirt, and I pushed my hands along them and put my cheek against the dark cotton, just for a second. It was the smell of those sheets, cool, unwashed—like something I really wanted, going stale.

That is what woke me up. ♦

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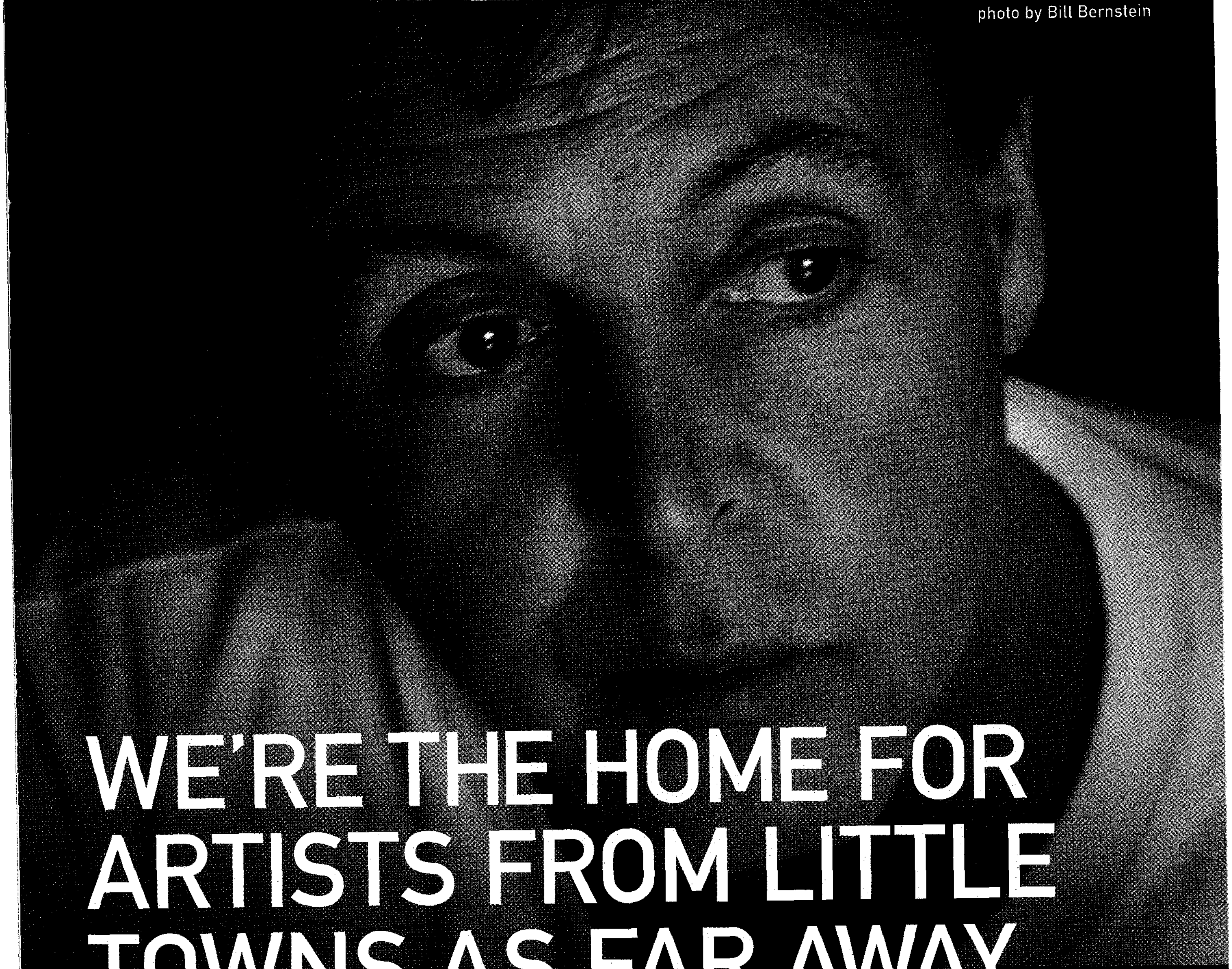

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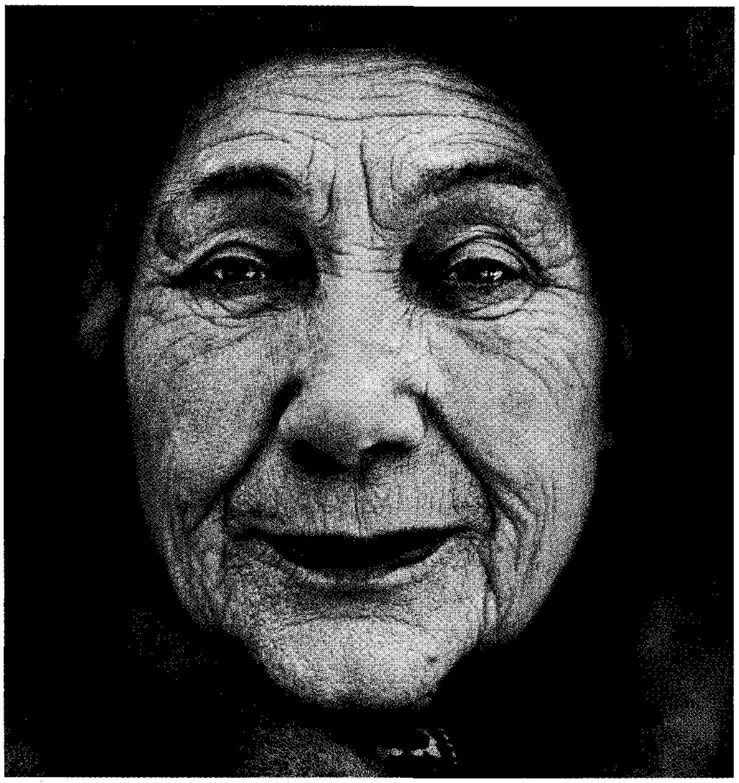
BY LORE SEGAL



MARTIN ROEMERS/PANOS PICTURES

On one of the first days of the New Year, Jack called Hope. "Let's have lunch," he said. "I've got an agenda." No need to specify the Café Provence on upper Broadway, or the time—fifteen minutes before noon, when they were sure of getting their table by the window.

They did the menu, heard the specials. Hope said, "I'm always going to order something different," but ordered the onion soup. Jack ordered the cassoulet, saying, "I *should* have the fish.

"And a bottle of your Merlot," he told the unsmiling proprietress, "which we will have right away."

"We'll share a salad," Hope said. She saw Jack watch the proprietress walk off in the direction of the bar, in a remarkably short skirt for a woman of fifty. Hope saw the long, brown, athletic legs, bare even in January, with Jack's eyes. Jack, a large man, with a heavy, dark face, turned to Hope. "So?"

"O.K., I guess. You?"

Jack said, "My agenda: if we were still making resolutions, what would yours be?"

Hope's interest pricked right up. "I'm thinking. You go first."

Jack said, "I'm going to watch what I eat. It's not the weight; it's the constantly thinking of eating. I don't eat real meals unless Jeremy comes over." Jeremy was Jack's son.

Hope said, "I'm going to watch what I watch and then I'm going to turn the TV off. It's ugly waking mornings with the thing flickering. It feels debauched."

Jack said, "I'm not going to order books from Amazon till I've read the ones on my shelves."

Hope said, "I'm going to hang up my clothes even when nobody is coming over. Nora is very severe with me." Nora was Hope's daughter.

The wine arrived. Jack did the label-checking, cork-sniffing, tasting, and nodding. The salad came. Hope served their two plates. Jack indicated Hope's hair, which she had done in an upsweep. "Very fetching," he commented.

"Thank you. Here's an old new resolution: Going to learn French. What was the name of my teacher when we got back from Paris? I once counted eleven years of school French, but it was you who always had to do the talking."

Jack said, "I want to learn how to pray."

Hope looked across the table to see if he was being cute. Jack was concentrating on folding a whole lettuce leaf into his mouth.

Hope said, "I'll never understand the principle of not cutting it into bite size."

The onion soup came, the cassoulet came. Jack asked Hope if she would like to go back.

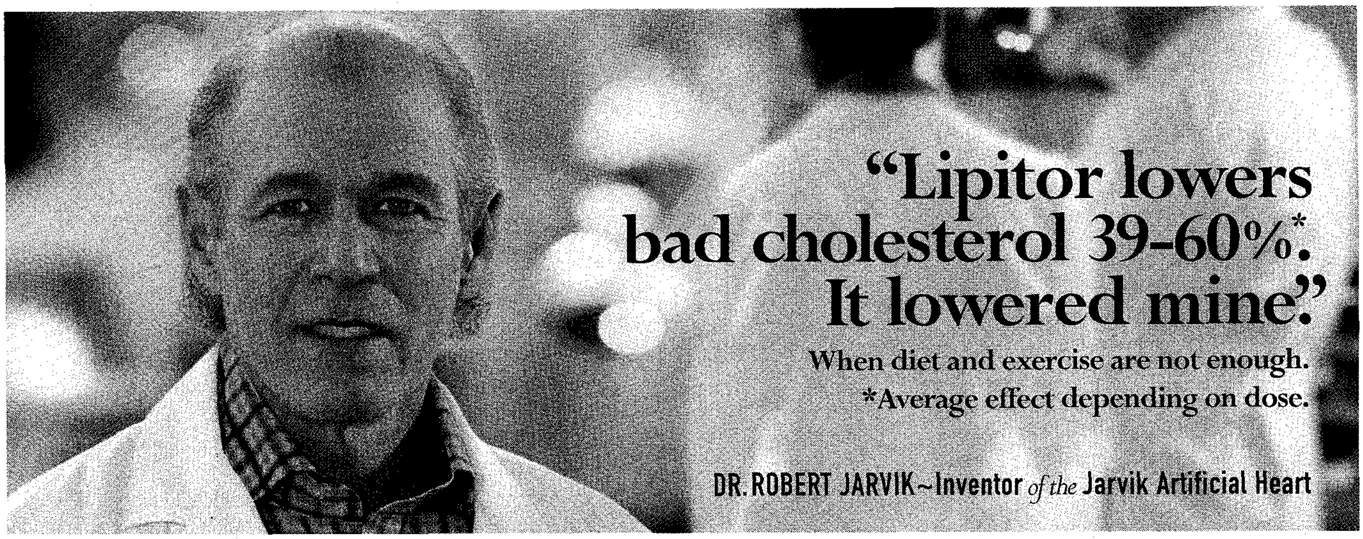
"Go back? Back to Paris!" Jack and Hope had lived together before marrying two other people. Jack subsequently divorced his wife, who had subsequently died. Hope was widowed.

"To Paris. To Aix," Jack said.

"Something I've been meaning to ask you," Hope said. "Were you and I ever together in an old, old garden? Did we walk under century-old trees? Did we lie down in the grass and look into tree crowns in France, or was that in England? Was it an old English garden or is this a garden in a book?"

"What's to keep us?" Jack said.

There were a lot of reasons, of course, to keep them from going back. Two of the littlest were at this moment flattening their noses against the outside of the restaurant window. Ten-year-old Benjamin stuck his thumbs in his ears and wiggled his fingers at his grandfather. Hope made as if to catch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Please see additional important information on next page.

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LPU00063AA

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF LIPITOR

Serious side effects in a small number of people:

- **Muscle problems** that can lead to kidney problems, including kidney failure. Your chance for muscle problems is higher if you take certain other medicines with LIPITOR.
- **Liver problems**. Your doctor may do blood tests to check your liver before you start LIPITOR and while you are taking it.

Symptoms of muscle or liver problems include:

- Unexplained muscle weakness or pain, especially if you have a fever or feel very tired
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Brown or dark-colored urine
- Feeling more tired than usual
- Your skin and the whites of your eyes turn yellow

If you have these symptoms, call your doctor right away.

The most common side effects of LIPITOR are:

- Headache
- Diarrhea, gas
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- Upset stomach and stomach pain
- Muscle and joint pain

Side effects are usually mild and may go away by themselves. Fewer than 3 people out of 100 stopped taking LIPITOR because of side effects.

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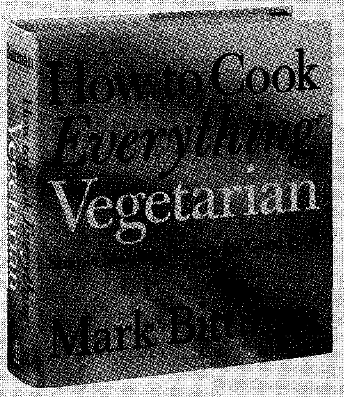

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her granddaughter's hand through the glass. This made little Miranda laugh. And there was Hope's daughter, Nora, with baby Julie in a stroller, and Jack's son, Jeremy, standing out on the sidewalk.

"I'm just going to the bathroom," Hope mouthed to her daughter.

"What?" Nora mouthed back, her face sharpened with irritation. The baby was crying.

"She knows I can't hear her through the glass," Nora said to Jeremy.

Jeremy said, "You stay with the kids. I'll go in and get him. I'll see what your mother wants." Jeremy walked into the restaurant, passing Jack and Hope on his way to the corner where, an hour ago, he had folded up his father's wheelchair. Hope stood and came around the table to kiss Jack and be kissed goodbye.

"On the double, Dad," Jeremy said. "I need to get back to the office."

"I'll call you," Jack said to Hope. "We'll have lunch."

Hope was mouthing through the window again and Nora said, "Julie, shut up, please! Mom, *what*?" The baby had started screeching.

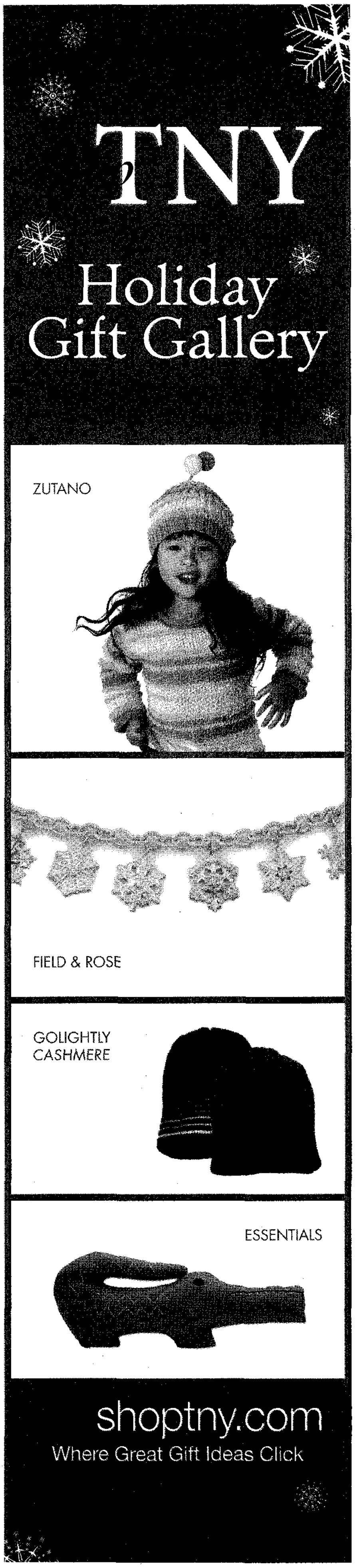
Hope pointed in the direction of the ladies' room. Nora signalled, You need me to go with you? Hope shook her head no. One of the reasons for the Café Provence was that its bathrooms were on the street floor, not in the basement, down a long stair.

Gathering her coat and bag, Hope opened the door to the ladies' room and saw, in the mirror above the basins, that her hair was coming out of its pins. She removed all the pins and stood gazing at the crone with the gray, shoulder-length hair girlishly loosened. Hope saw what Diane Arbus might have seen and was appalled, and being appalled pricked her interest right up. "I've got an agenda: the Arbus factor of old age," Hope looked forward to saying to Jack the next time it would be convenient for Jeremy and Nora to arrange lunch for them at the Café Provence. ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Amherst (N.Y.) Bee.

A Lamarck Drive resident reported that a bat was sleeping in his basement. It was actually a black sock.



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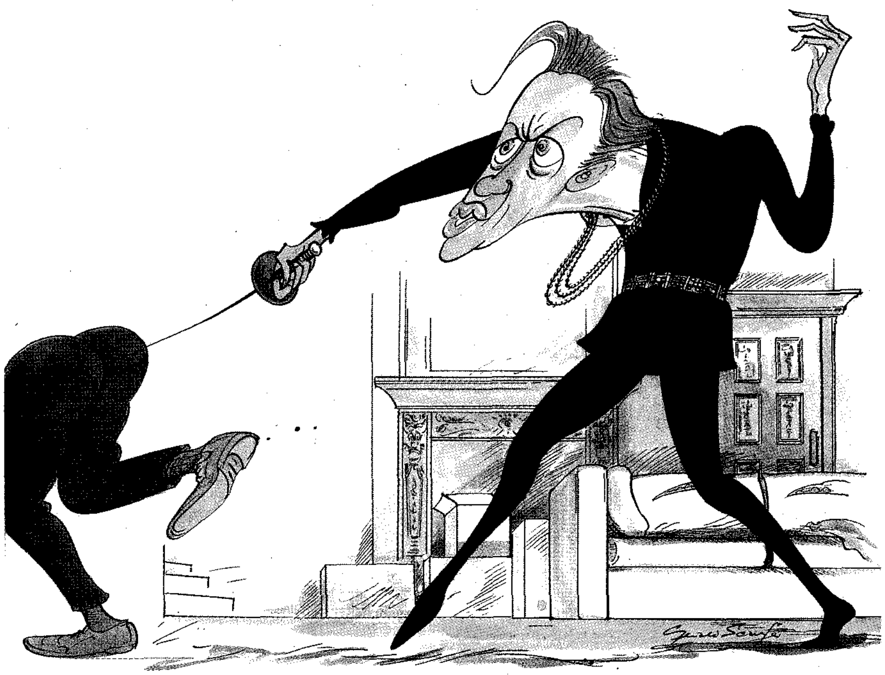
PERSONAL HISTORY

I HIT HAMLET

Behind the scenes at a Broadway fiasco.

BY PAUL RUDNICK

The ad in the *Times* real-estate listings said "medieval duplex," which was intriguing, unless "medieval" referred to the plumbing. It was 1987 and I was apartment hunting, so I arranged to meet the broker at a brownstone just off Washington Square. The apartment was four steep flights up, and the walls of the final landing were a rough stucco, with an odd-shaped niche high in the wall for a candle or a skull, just outside a rounded, rough-hewn door with elaborate ornamental hinges.



Casting the role of John Barrymore required an actor with dangerous magnetism.

GERALD SCARFE

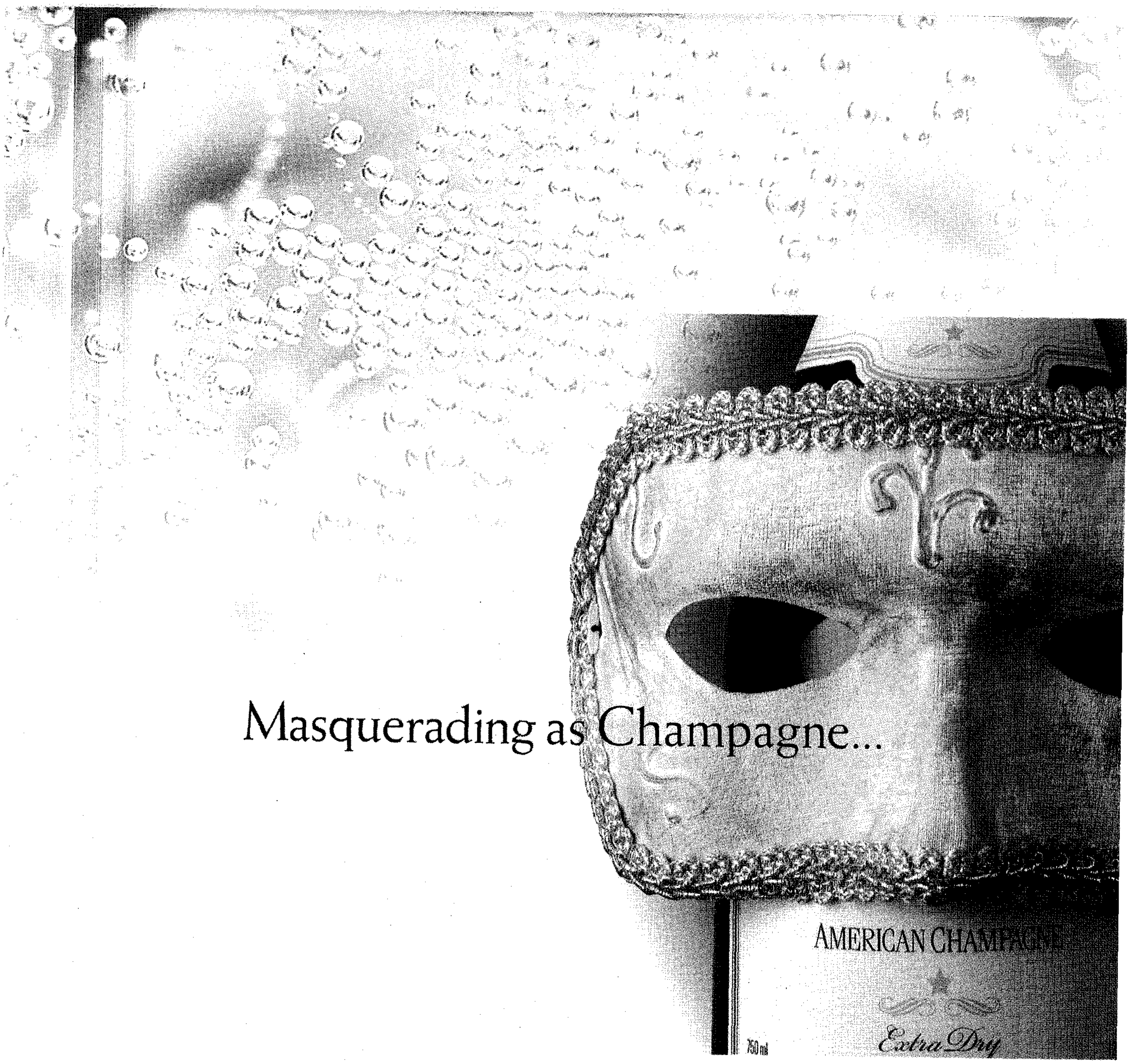
The apartment in question consisted of the full, narrow top floor, and I was smitten. The theatrical plasterwork continued throughout, and there was a bay window with a window seat, flanked by portholes of thick, leaded Mediterranean-blue stained glass, all overlooking the leafy corner of Washington Square Park where fanatics play chess. There was a micro-kitchen, one tiny closet, and a cramped, nineteen-seventies-vintage Pepto-Bismol-pink tiled bathroom, but none of this mattered, thanks to a vaulted skylight, a fireplace, assorted archways, and a hidden, winding staircase. The stairs led to the roof, where I found a large deck. A sun-bleached oak ship's wheel, six feet in diameter, leaned against the outer wall of a hobbit-scale cottage—one room, with a beamed ceiling. The broker was chatty, and she mentioned that the apartment had once been the home of John Barrymore.

Here's how long ago this was: I didn't snap up the place that very minute but told the broker that I'd phone her the next morning. That night, I called my agent, Helen Merrill, a German woman whose accent had only deepened with her decades in New York. When I told her about the apartment, she remarked, "Perhaps you vill find my hairpins." It seemed that Helen, thirty years earlier, had conducted an affair on the premises with Barrymore's son-in-law, an erstwhile actor married to the troubled Diana Barrymore, whose mother was a poetess aptly named Michael Strange. Helen recalled the apartment, if not the son-in-law, in fond detail, and the karma became overwhelming. The next day, I met with Winston Kulok, the affable owner of the town house, who with his family occupied the first two floors, and the lease on the Barrymore place was mine.

As I settled in, I researched my new home. Barrymore had taken up residence in 1917, just before he began performing his legendary Hamlet uptown. His film career at that point was limited to locally shot silent movies, including an early take on "Moby-Dick," which may have been the source of the ship's wheel. Barrymore had remodelled the apartment as a Gothic retreat, christening it the Alchemist's Corner. He had installed all the false beams, monastery-inspired ironwork, and stained glass, which made his lair resemble a stage set for an Agatha Christie whodunnit in summer stock. The rooftop had been his masterpiece, and had at one time included a garden, with cedar trees, a slate walkway, and a reflecting pool. Tons of soil had to be hoisted up by pulley, and eventually caused a collapse into the rooms below. Of Barrymore's vision only the cottage remained; he'd likened it to a roost overlooking the spires of Paris.

I read up on Barrymore's life—particularly in his entertainingly fraudulent and entirely ghostwritten autobiography and in "Good Night, Sweet Prince," an equally fanciful work, devised, soon after the star's death, by his close friend Gene Fowler. There was a story that, following Barrymore's demise, his buddies snatched his body from the morgue and propped it upright in a chair as a gag.

Barrymore was born into an illustrious family of American performers, which included his sister Ethel and his brother Lionel, and John had been nicknamed the Great Profile for his beauty and acclaimed as a classical actor of extraordinary personal magnetism and range. He was later drawn to Hollywood, appearing as Katharine Hepburn's wayward father in "A Bill of Divorcement," a mature Mercutio in an all-star "Romeo and Juliet," and, most uproariously, a bulging-eyed, fire-



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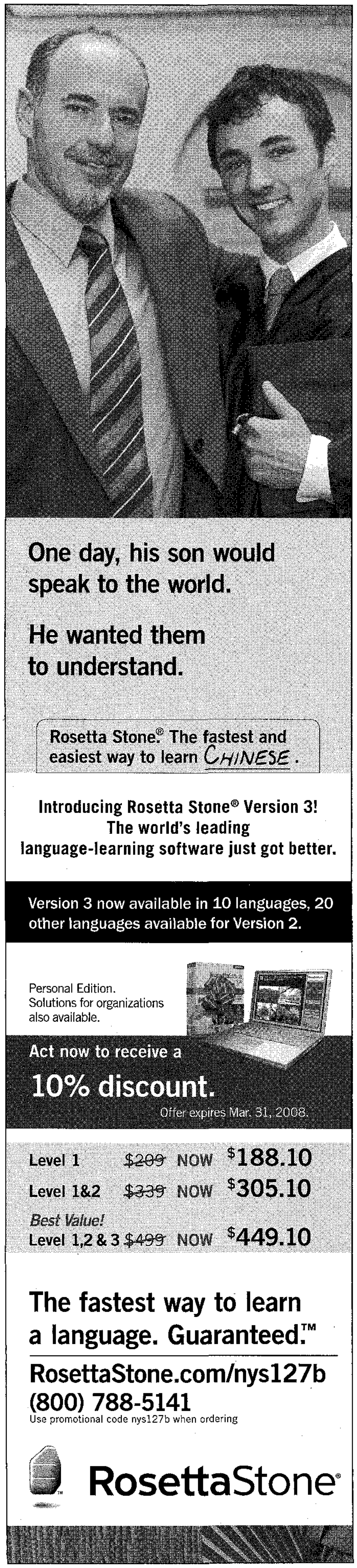

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lightly turning
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business of con-
fronting the
preference for
survival

my mother said the
children are grown we
are both so sick let us
die together my father
replied no no you
will be well he lied

of course I
want you in the world
whether I'm in it or
not your spirit
I probably mean

there is always
something to say in
the end speaking
without breath one
of us will be lost
to the other

—*Grace Paley*

breathing producer, opposite Carole Lombard, in the screwball gem "Twentieth Century." Perhaps his signature role was that of a handsome, dissolute jewel thief, redeemed by his brief, ethereal passion for Greta Garbo in the sumptuous M-G-M melodrama "Grand Hotel." The film exemplified the public perception of Barrymore as a gifted, doomed wastrel.

The more I absorbed, and the more months I spent under Barrymore's bastard Jacobean roof, the more I felt moved to write something set at the address. Someone or something had led me to these quarters and would not be denied. I began a novel about a character named Andrew Rally, the young star of "L.A. Medical," a fatuous network gold mine. Andrew moves into the Barrymore apartment just as he's about to play Hamlet at Shakespeare in the Park. He gets apprehensive about returning to the stage, and he's ready to flee to Los Angeles when the ghost of Barrymore appears. I soon realized that the material would make a better play than a novel, as it took place primarily in a single location and was overrun with theatrical types. I surrendered, to God or Satan or the will of Barrymore, and completed a draft of a two-act comedy called "I Hate Hamlet."

Following a successful out-of-town workshop in Saratoga, a group of producers decided to bring the play to Broadway. The characters by then included Deirdre, Andrew's love interest and an ardent twenty-nine-year-old virgin; Gary Peter Lefkowitz, Andrew's pal and writer-producer-director, who is given to remarks like "You don't *do* art, you buy it"; Felicia, a gregarious real-estate broker; and Andrew's agent, Lillian, a flinty but softhearted German émigrée, a tribute to Helen Merrill. In an early scene, Lillian asks her companions if she might smoke, and Deirdre implores her not to because it's such an unhealthy addiction. Lillian replies, "I know, I really must stop." Deirdre asks, "Smoking?" and Lillian says, "No—asking."

Most of the cast were New York stage actors, including Evan Handler as Andrew and the whiskey-voiced Caroline Aaron as Felicia. Lillian was to be played by Celeste Holm, who was practically the sole surviving cast member of "All About Eve." Adam Arkin would be Gary. Our great challenge was in casting the role of John Barrymore—ghost, thespian, and lecher. If you've written a star, you need a star. From Fanny Brice to Ray Charles, the impersonator must reignite the legend. The audience needed to believe that whoever played Barrymore, from the instant he stepped onstage, was an Olympian Hamlet, a devastating seducer, and everyone's favorite scoundrel. "I Hate Hamlet" was a romantic comedy by an unknown playwright, being directed by the very young Michael Engler, so it wasn't easy to find, persuade, and sign a Barrymore.

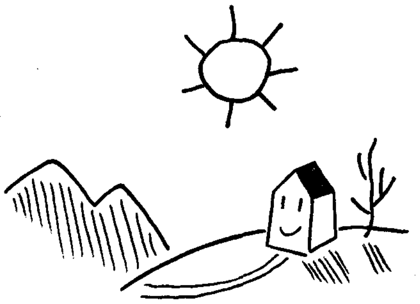
The search finally arrived at Nicol Williamson, a Scotsman who'd achieved fame several decades earlier on the London stage, as a self-loathing solicitor in John Osborne's "Inadmissible Evidence." Nicol had played a savage Hamlet in England and New York, and he'd become a reliable character presence in such films as "Robin and Marian" and "Excalibur"; in the latter, he'd been a memorably baroque Merlin. Onstage, Nicol was notorious. At a curtain call during the Broadway run of the musical "Rex," in which Nicol was Henry VIII, he'd slapped a fellow-actor, who Nicol felt was drawing focus. Our casting director had heard countless tales of similar misbehavior and advised us to acquire Nicol's services "only over my dead body." We didn't listen.

Nicol accepted the role, and an introductory lunch at a midtown restaurant was arranged between our Barrymore, the producing team, the director, and me. Like any decent star, Nicol arrived last. He was a tall, shambling man, with a bald pate bookended by buttresses of reddish curls. His eyes were doleful and piercing, as if he'd seen far too much, enjoyed most of it, and had somehow managed to avoid arrest. His basso voice was gorgeously Shakespearean.

"Hallo, mates!" he boomed, and we all grinned and exchanged delighted glances, because Nicol was, if nothing else, everything an American wants a reprobate, Continental stage personality to be. He beguiled everyone with tales of beautiful women, show business, and air travel. He was an incipient tyrant, an Amin or an Evita, caught at an early stage, where charm was of the essence in crafting a grateful, adoring cult. Clearly, here was Barrymore. After many hours, as the group departed, Nicol slung a long arm over my shoulders and said, "Dear fellow, I know you've heard tattle, but don't believe a word. I'm in top, fighting form. And I haven't touched a drop in over a year."

I chose to believe it, despite a quick backward glance at the table, which held a brandy snifter, a wine bottle, and a beer mug, all of which had been recently emptied into Nicol.

The early rehearsal period was, as early rehearsal periods often are, a promising Eden. Nicol embraced every company member, and everyone seemed happy with the play. Celeste provided delectable anecdotes. In 1949, she was co-starring with Loretta Young in the uplifting film "Come to the Stable," in which the pair appeared as radiant, tennis-playing nuns, founding a children's hospital in Bethlehem, Con-



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necticut. In reality, years earlier, Loretta had secretly given birth to Clark Gable's illegitimate daughter. For publicity purposes, she'd then contrived to remain virginal by adopting her own child. All of this subterfuge had made Loretta an even more devout Catholic, and during the filming, whenever anyone used profanity, she had the person drop a nickel into a cuss box, with the proceeds shipped to Vatican-related charities. One afternoon, Ethel Merman visited the set and was told of the cuss box. She yanked a bill from her wallet, located Celeste's co-star, and brayed, "Here's ten bucks, Loretta. Go fuck yourself."

In our second week, Nicol invited me to his small, bare Hell's Kitchen pied-à-terre, where he hunched over a Hohner organ and played and bleated a song cycle that he'd composed, based on his divorce. Each number was devoted to a militant, obscene hatred of his ex-wife and assorted female members of her family. After each ditty excoriating another ungrateful bitch, Nicol would turn to me eagerly for an opinion. "Wow," I kept repeating. "She sounds awful."

"Yes!" Nicol thundered each time. "That's exactly right!"

Early in the play, the real-estate agent suggests that Andrew hold a séance to make contact with the ghost of Barrymore. An attempt is made, which, though apparently unsuccessful, later results in the great man's return to earth. "Am I dead?" the ghost inquires. "Or just incredibly drunk?" To prepare for this scene, the cast decided to stage an actual séance in my apartment. We hired a psychic, a frazzled woman with a matching perm who, I suspected, owned more than one cat and far more than one scented candle.

In my apartment, everyone gathered around a massive oak library table. I'd furnished the place in the Barrymore manner, with burnished leather couches, heavily carved and gilded thrones, the sort of antiqued coats of arms found in any suburban steak house, and a tarnished, tilting brass candelabra. I served reasonably priced wine, microwave popcorn, and Pepperidge Farm Milanos.

The meter was running, so I encouraged the psychic to aim for a direct hit on Barrymore. We all clasped hands, and she shut her eyes, clanged her finger cymbals, and began a rhythmic moaning that was either a trance state or a belated Kaddish for my grandmother. She directed us to concentrate our spiritual energy on the door that opened on the stairs to the rooftop. Nicol, who'd cornered the reasonably priced wine, staggered to his feet and, in a sepulchral wail worthy of any character on a "Simpsons" Halloween special, bellowed, "Come!"

Nothing. We all sat up straighter and glared even more aggressively at the door. "COME!" Nicol bellowed again, raising his arms in Dionysian welcome.

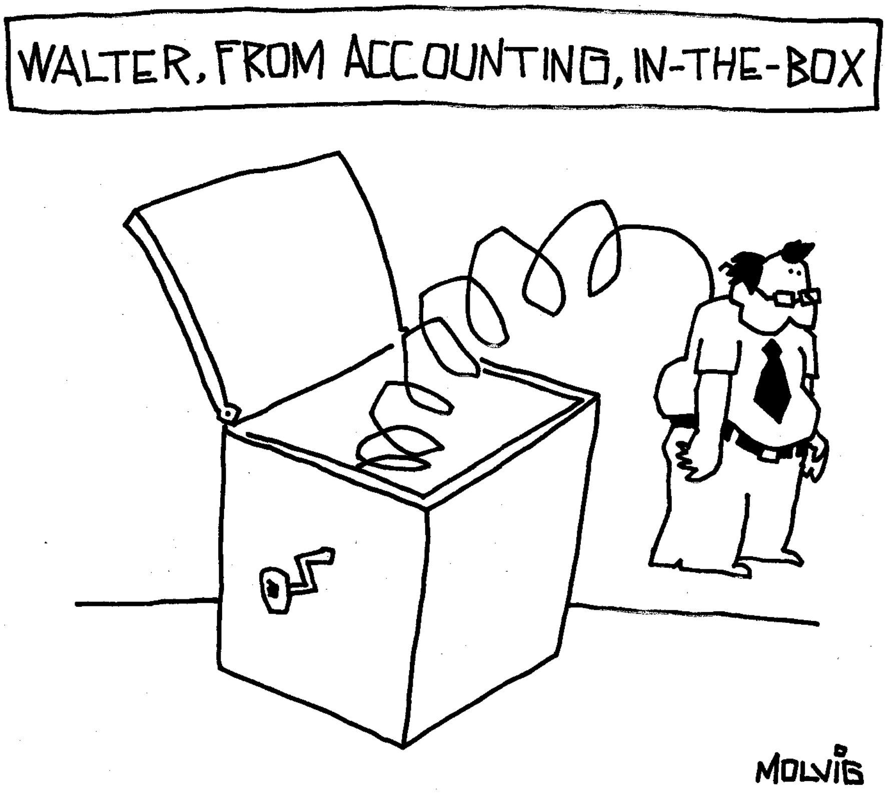
Still nothing. We were all quivering with ecstatic, ectoplasmic yearning, and Nicol howled "COOOME!!!" with such ferocity that I feared for his sexual partners.

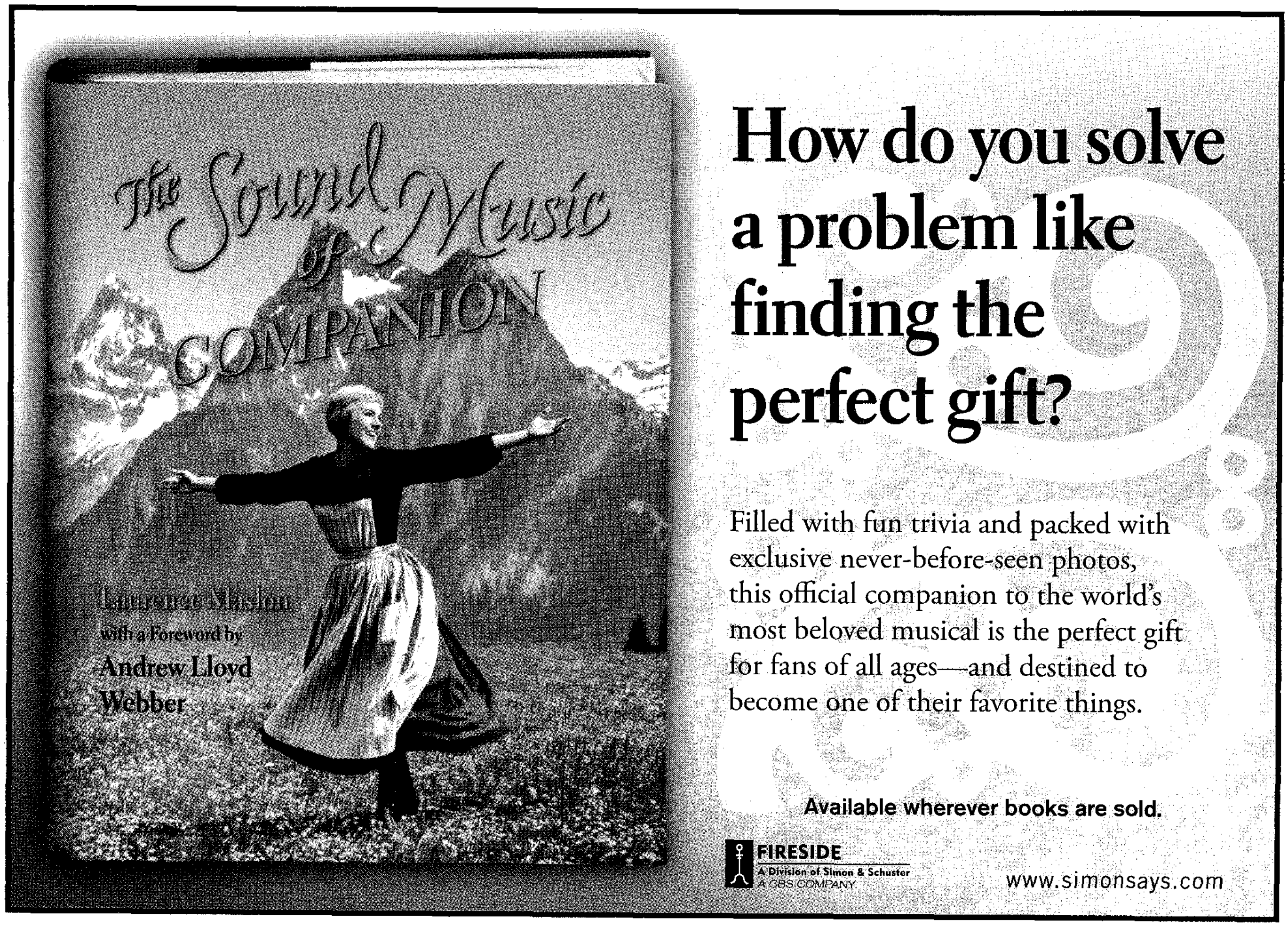
The door moved a fraction of an inch. It didn't swing open, and Nicol had certainly been producing some Hindenburg-quality hot air, but who knows? I've often wondered if everything that followed was the result of that séance, if just maybe we'd actually unleashed some cackling, chaos-seeking, heedless Barrymore imp.

I continued to rewrite the play, but with each passing week Nicol grew more paranoid. His complaint was essentially that he was being asked to appear onstage with other people. He took to calling me at 3 A.M., always opening with a solicitous "I didn't wake you, did I?" He'd had a brainstorm: what would I think if Evan left the show and Nicol played the parts of both Andrew and Barrymore simultaneously? I couldn't even begin to formulate a response, since not only was Evan first-rate but the characters had many scenes together, including a ripsnorting duel that climaxed the first act. As I sputtered, Nicol jumped in: "Oh, I know just what you're thinking. Of course I could play both parts easily, but Andrew is intended to be what, twenty-six years old? And you're wondering, Will the audience accept me as twenty-six? It might be a concern, but it's not a film—from the stage, there'd be no problem at all!" Nicol was then fifty-two.

Our preview performances began. The set, by Tony Straiges, was a grander approximation of my apartment, resembling the great hall of some fantasy castle, with tapestries, a large oil portrait of Nicol as Barrymore, and, on a wooden stand, an enormous parchment-covered globe that, in the early moments of Act II, opened to reveal a wet bar.

Nicol was sensational. In a luxuriant wig and sculpted black tunic and tights,

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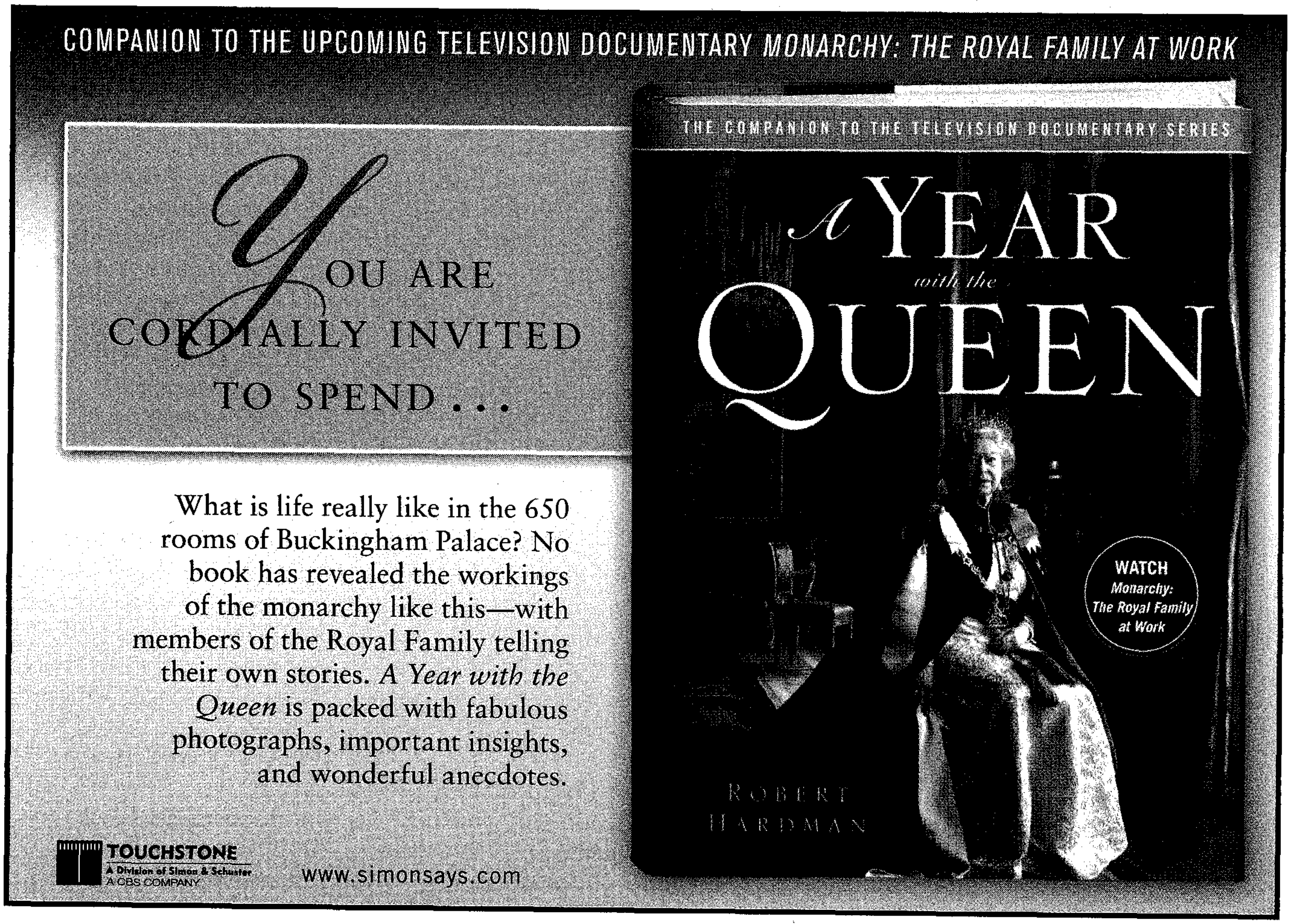
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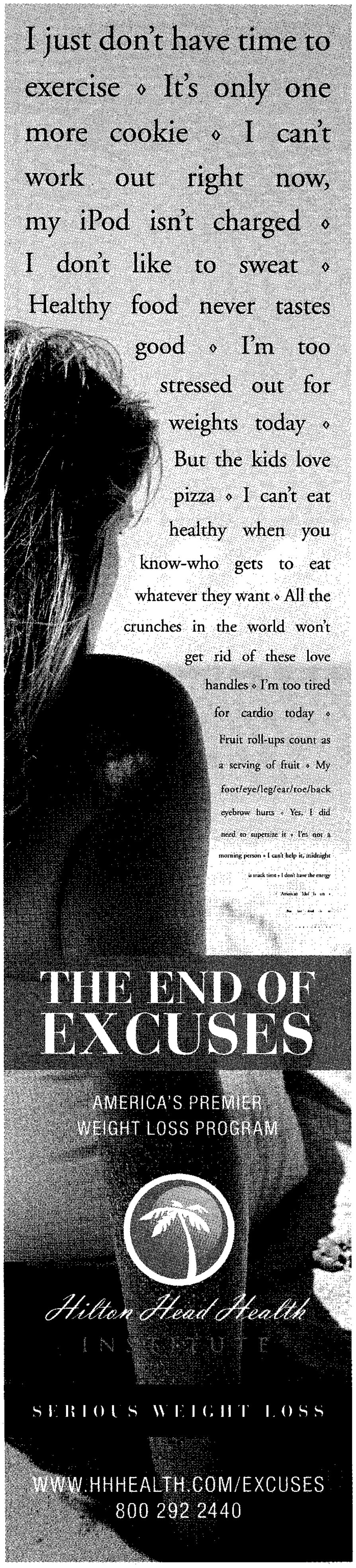

I just don't have time to exercise ◦ It's only one more cookie ◦ I can't work out right now, my iPod isn't charged ◦ I don't like to sweat ◦ Healthy food never tastes good ◦ I'm too stressed out for weights today ◦ But the kids love pizza ◦ I can't eat healthy when you know-who gets to eat whatever they want ◦ All the crunches in the world won't get rid of these love handles ◦ I'm too tired for cardio today ◦ Fruit roll-ups count as a serving of fruit ◦ My foot/eye/leg/ear/toe/back eyebrow hurts ◦ Yes, I did need to supersize it ◦ I'm not a morning person ◦ I can't help it, midnight is snack time ◦ I don't have the energy ◦ American Idol is on ◦ [illegible]

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he was utterly persuasive as a dashing, brutally comic Barrymore. He commanded the stage, and seemed to be having the time of his life. He was possessed by Barrymore, both in the play's more burlesque moments and in his speeches from "Hamlet," which he delivered with eloquence and simplicity, as a lesson for Andrew and the rest of us. It was too good to last.

After the first few shows, Nicol embarked on a self-destructive binge. He repeatedly propositioned the stage manager, and when she resisted his groping advances he called the management and demanded that she be fired. This didn't happen, but the atmosphere backstage became poisonous. The cast posed for a raft of promotional photographs, and Nicol tried to block the release of any pictures in which he appeared with another actor. Then he began murmuring directions, while onstage, to other cast members: "Is *that* what you're doing?," "God, that's awful," and worse. During scenes in which the script called for him to hover, as a ghost, and eavesdrop on the action, he would leave the stage. He gradually and deliberately alienated almost everyone, until the production became a war zone. One night, I stopped by his dressing room to make a final attempt to repair our relationship. When I entered, he took a wobbly swing at me, aimed at my head and connecting with my shoulder. I was more surprised than hurt; it was like being assaulted by a sleeping bag. Further revisions to the script became impossible.

During the opening-night performance, at the Walter Kerr Theatre, I sat crouched on the carpeted steps at the rear of the balcony. Like any opening-night crowd, the audience was appreciative and vocal. As I watched, I thought, My play is opening tonight on Broadway. This was a glorious and yet conventional dream, and that was the problem. Conventional dreams, such as Broadway openings, weddings, and elections, aren't about joy; they're about expectations, pressure, and blind panic.

The cast party was at Tavern on the Green. Everyone's friends and family were in attendance, and Nicol ruled the night. He still wasn't speaking to many of the others, but there he was, in a white dinner jacket, grabbing the microphone and forcing the band to back him on assorted Tom Jones hits. It was like attending the coronation of a sadistic, self-proclaimed emperor, with toasts encouraged by armed guards. I longed for Nicol to be a caddish yet magnetic rogue and to win everyone back. But he couldn't. Owing to drink and bitterness and rage, he needed to be loathed by friends and adored by strangers.

The reviews were mixed. "Mixed reviews" is a phrase like "creative differences" or "of unknown origin"; it's what the government tells the widow. Nicol was accused of genius, slumming, and everything in between. Reports of his bad behavior had been rampant, so his notices were like bulletins from the front, hoping to make sense of a battle still in progress.

Now that we had opened, the fun truly began. During the first act, Barrymore's ghost arrives to coax and browbeat Andrew into playing Hamlet. Andrew is ambivalent and wary. While he hates playing opposite a hand puppet, in his lucrative ads for Trailburst Nuggets breakfast cereal, he's terrified of the stage, the tights, and the Bard. His friend Gary backs him up: "I mean, it's not even dinner theatre. They sell whole-wheat brownies and little bags of nuts and raisins. It's snack theatre. It's Shakespeare for squirrels."

Barrymore scoffs, asking Andrew, "Can you possibly believe that every prospective Hamlet did not tremble and pale and bolt? Hamlet will change you, Andrew, make no mistake. What are you to be—artist, or lunchbox?"

"Get out!" Andrew wails.

"En garde!" cries Barrymore, now brandishing a gleaming sword.

I wasn't there on the Thursday night, a month or so after the opening, when Nicol went for broke. I had gone to see another show, and at a restaurant afterward a friend rushed over to my table, asking, "Oh my God! Have you heard anything? Is he really hurt? Is he O.K.?"

"Who? What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Tonight! At your play! Nicol Williamson stabbed Evan Handler!"

During the swordplay scene, Nicol,

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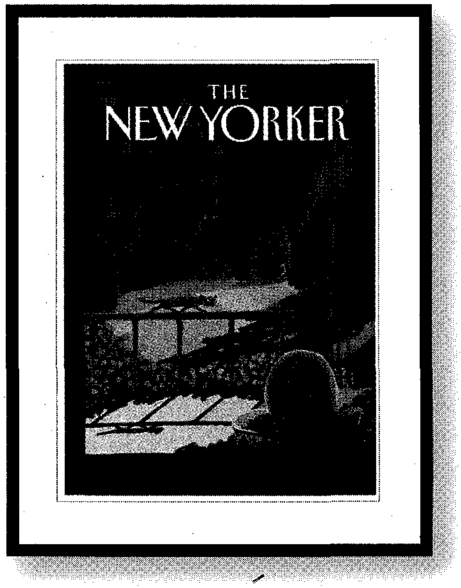
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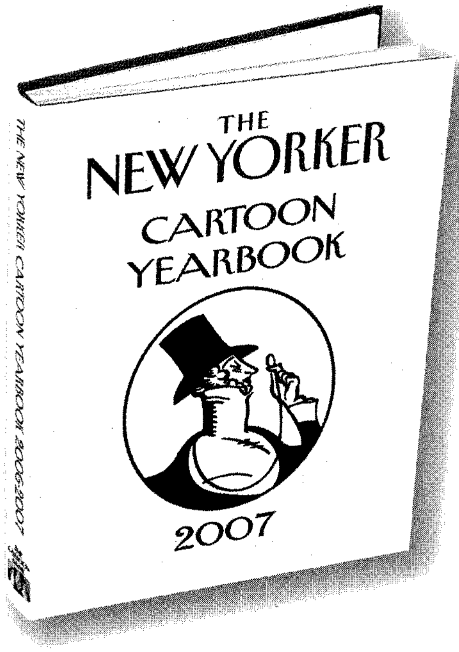
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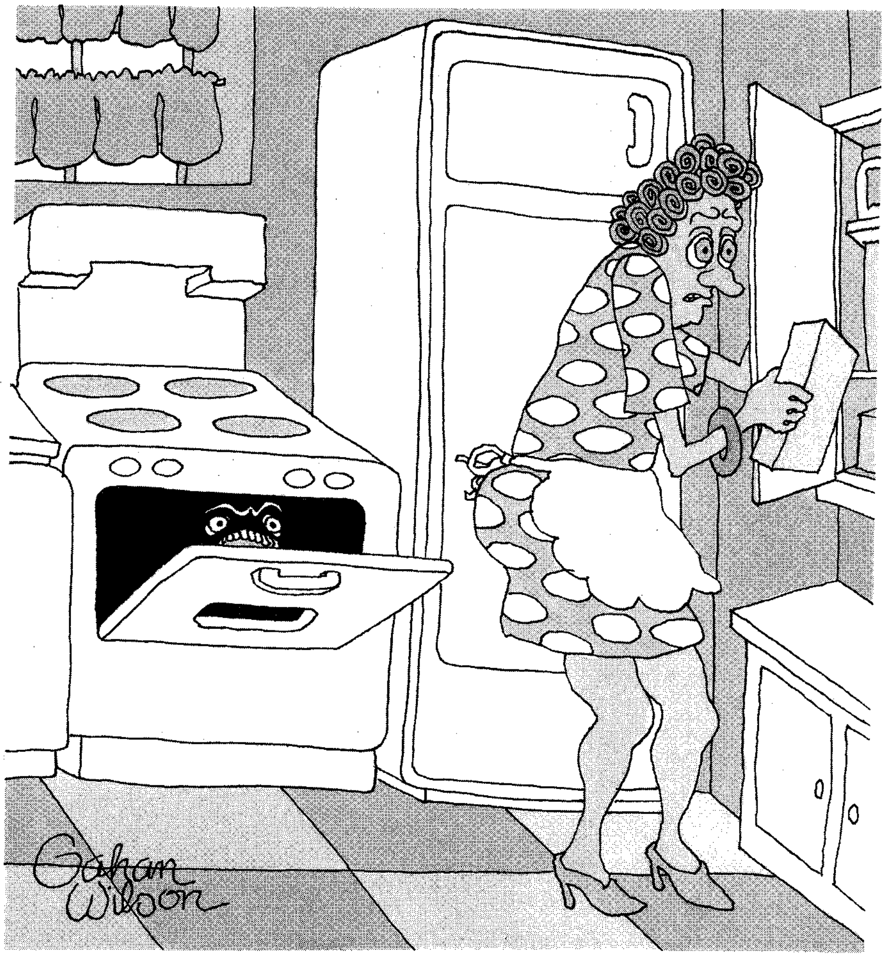

“Yo—I’m way overdone in here!”

• •

it seemed, had actually struck his co-star. Evan, quite wisely, had left the stage, the performance, and, ultimately, the production. His understudy had finished the show that night.

Later, another friend came running up to me. “Oh my God,” he said. “It’s so tragic!”

“Nicol?” I asked. “And my play?”

“No! Jerzy Kosinski! He’s dead!” Kosinski had committed suicide in his bathtub. The next day, Kosinski’s grisly end shared billing with the “I Hate Hamlet” fracas on the front page of the *Times*. In the *Post’s* weekend edition, a photograph of the duel filled the entire front page, under the headline “‘HAMLET’ ACTOR STORMS OFF STAGE AFTER CO-STAR WHACKS HIM IN BUTT.” There was coverage all over the world, and TV news crews stood outside the theatre every night. I learned to say “No comment” in many languages.

Evan Handler wanted to bring Nicol and the production up on charges. A meeting was called, and the producers and I tried to determine a course of action. Should we fire Nicol? We realized that he had been brilliantly, maliciously sly: because of all the publicity, he now *was* the show, and no other star in his right mind would step into his role. The situation was impossible. At an earlier meeting, two of our producers, the gentlest and most well-intentioned men, became so frustrated that a fistfight broke out. The brawl ended within seconds, with instant apologies all around. Even when he wasn’t in the room, Nicol was winning.

Evan’s understudy took over, and the show wobbled along for a few more weeks. Nicol was in clover. He began leading the audiences in sing-alongs of “Happy Days Are Here Again,” and, at the curtain calls, he liked to instruct the crowd to “Head home and enjoy a nice juicy slice of sexual intercourse!” The Tony Award nominations were announced around this time, and while Adam Arkin received a nod Nicol did not. He was livid, and took to haranguing the nominating committee from the stage.

I attended the closing-night performance, and afterward I went backstage. On a small table outside Nicol’s dressing room there was a bottle containing his blood-pressure medication. I considered replacing the pills with—what? Arsenic? Rat poison? What could possibly kill him?

I had never spent time around a world-class, drain-the-keg loon before. Nicol belonged to a boisterous, selfish, élite cadre of mostly British actors, the Angry Young Men of the nineteen-fifties and sixties. They were the working-class blokes who’d banished the decorum of Gielgud and Olivier—brawlers who went for birds and lager and, at least onstage, a grittier realism. This reckless brotherhood included Richard Burton, Richard Harris, and Peter O’Toole, all of whom binged their way to the top. But Nicol had been denied the screen stardom, and the eventual knighthood, that his peers had won, and this can’t have pleased him.

Nicol believed, I think, that if he could just get to the theatre, if he could only step onstage, he’d be fine. Some nights, he’d saunter in at five, even ten minutes after eight, knowing that we’d hold the curtain. But there was one performance when he’d overslept, or passed out in his apartment, and his understudy had gone on. Although we hadn’t spoken in weeks, the next day Nicol called me, assuring me that everything was fine, and that he’d be on that evening. Then he abruptly hung up. For the first time, he’d sounded shaken.

After the final performance, I had no intention of talking to Nicol. I was still too angry. As I was heading upstairs, to bid farewell to the more lucid actors, the door to Nicol’s dressing room swung open. He stood there, a soused, lunatic, fifty-two-year-old Hamlet. We stared at each other. Nicol finally spoke, and his tone was both kind and accusing. He said, “You knew this was going to happen.” And then he smiled and shut the door. ◆

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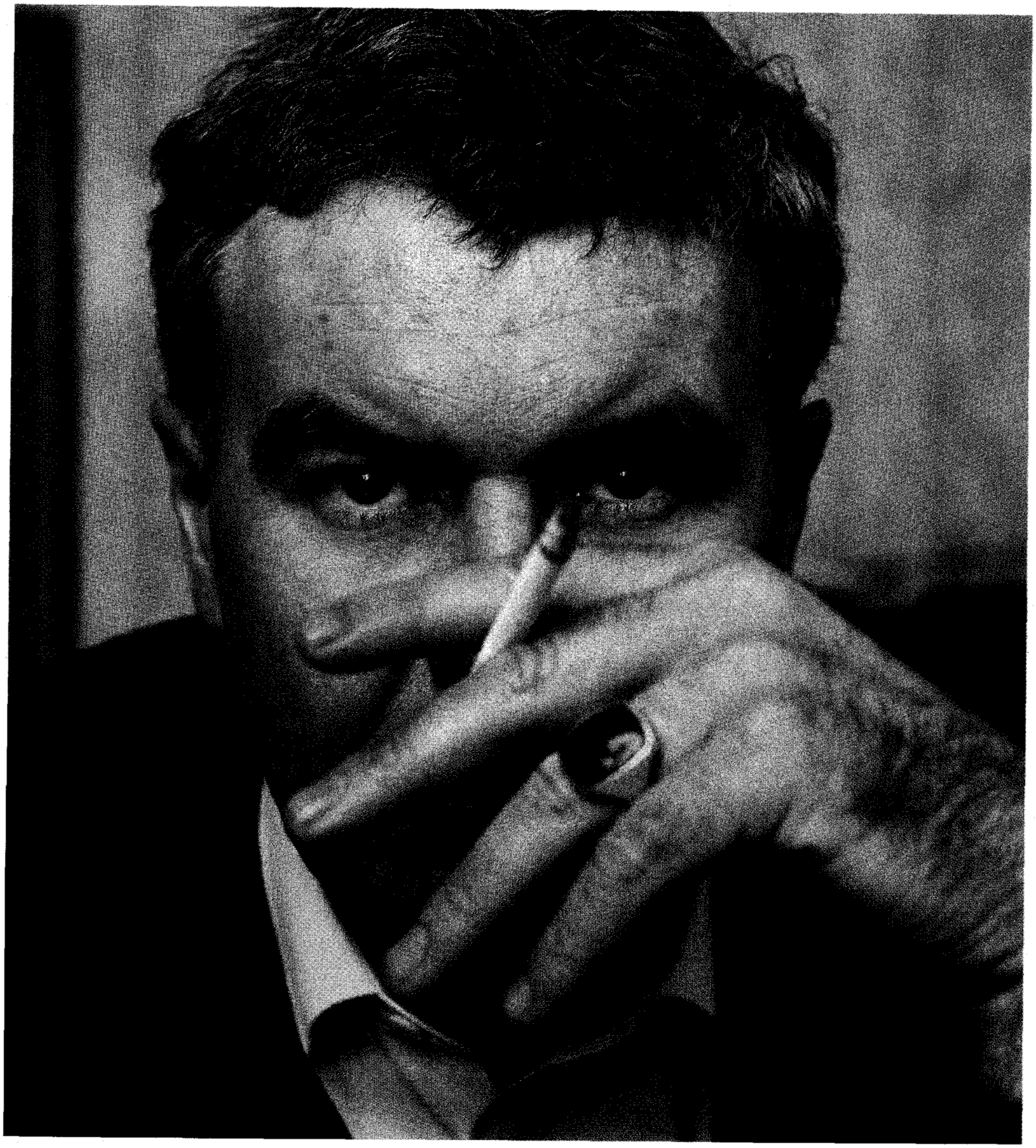
LIFE AND LETTERS

ROUGH CROSSINGS

The cutting of Raymond Carver.



Carver in 1984. Successful after years of obscurity, he was now confident enough to reject advice. Photograph by Bob Adelman.

On the morning of July 8, 1980, Raymond Carver wrote an impassioned letter to Gordon Lish, his friend and editor at Alfred A. Knopf, begging his forgiveness but insisting that Lish "stop production" of Carver's forthcoming collection of stories, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Carver had been up all night reviewing Lish's severe editorial cuts—two stories had been slashed by nearly seventy per cent, many by almost half; many descriptions and digressions were gone; endings had been truncated or rewritten—and he was unnerved to the point of desperation. A recovering alcoholic and a fragile spirit, Carver wrote that he was "confused, tired, paranoid, and afraid." He feared exposure before his friends, who had read many of the stories in their earlier versions. If the book went forward, he said, he feared he might never write again; if he stopped it, he feared losing Lish's love and friendship. And he feared, above all, a return to "those dark days," not long before, when he was broken, defeated. "I'll tell you the truth, my very sanity is on the line here," he wrote to Lish.

Considering the dreary facts of Raymond Carver's origins, he was lucky to have survived and published at all. He was born in the logging town of Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938, and grew up in Yakima, Washington. His mother worked as a retail clerk and a waitress, and his father, who had ridden the rails during the Dust Bowl days, was a saw filer in a lumber mill, a storyteller, a depressive, and a blackout drunk, who died at fifty-three. Before Carver was twenty, he was the father of two children, and he and his first wife, Maryann Burk, began a life of working "crap jobs" and dodging bill collectors. Over the years, Carver swept floors in a hospital, pumped gas, cleaned toilets, and picked tulips. He wanted desperately to write poems and stories about the landscapes he'd seen and the people he'd known, and he had even published a few stories in "little" magazines while studying at Humboldt State, at Chico State College (with John Gardner), and, until his money ran out, in the writing program at the University of Iowa. But he could write only fitfully. "I scarcely had time to turn around or draw a breath," he said. Alcohol soon became an even greater obstacle to writing than the need to pay the bills. Over time, there were bankruptcies, blackouts, and breakdowns, physical and mental. "I made a wasteland of everything I touched," he once remarked. "Let's just say, on occasion, the police were involved and emergency rooms and courtrooms."

In 1967, while working for the textbook publisher Science Research Associates, in Palo Alto, Carver met Lish, who was also working at a textbook publishing house. Lish, a voluble, eccentric, and literary man, began inviting Carver to his place for lunch and to talk about books. Lish was impressed by Carver, in particular by the exoticism of his characters—"hillbillies of the shopping mall," Lish later called them. Let go from S.R.A., Carver lived on severance and unemployment insurance, and was able to write stories with greater concentration. "Something happened during that time in the writing, to the writing," he said. "It went underground and then it came up again, and it was bathed in a new light for me." Lish was extremely encouraging to Carver, and when, in 1969, he moved to New York to be the fiction editor at *Esquire*, he became Carver's lifeline.

In 1971, Lish accepted Carver's story "Neighbors," and throughout the seventies he continued to publish Carver's work—stories of marriage, struggle, and the working poor—or guided him to other publications. He also consistently cut the stories to the linguistic bone, developing a uniquely spare, laconic, almost threatening aesthetic that was eventually dubbed "minimalism" or "Kmart realism."

Carver seemed only to encourage and accept Lish's ministrations—at least, until the summer of 1980. There are dozens of letters in Lish's papers at the Lilly Library, at Indiana University, that attest to Carver's gratitude to Lish for his friendship, support, and editing. After hearing the news that, at Lish's urging, McGraw-Hill had accepted his first collection, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?," Carver gleefully wrote Lish that he intended to "set the globe afire" and follow his lead on reworking the stories: "Tell me which ones and I'll go after it, or them. . . . Or I will leave it up to you & you tell me what you think needs done or doing."

The year 1977 was, for Carver, a new and miraculous beginning. His collection was nominated for a National Book Award. Even more surprising, on June 2nd, after a series of hospitalizations, he quit drinking, and stayed sober for the rest of his life. "I guess I just wanted to live," he recalled. Around the same time, Lish left *Esquire*, but he soon accepted an invitation to join Knopf. Lish had built his reputation at *Esquire* by publishing such writers as Carver, Don DeLillo, Barry Hannah, and Richard Ford, and Carver reacted to the news of Lish's departure from the magazine with a tribute. "Just knowing you were there, at your desk, was an inspiration for me to write," he wrote Lish. "You, my friend, are my idea of an ideal reader, always have been, always, that is, forever, will be."

At Knopf, Lish signed Carver to a five-thousand-dollar contract for his next collection of stories. Carver and Maryann Burk had separated, and he was living, happy and sober, with the poet Tess Gallagher. Teaching jobs and grants were also coming his way. Carver's "second life," as he called it, had begun.

Editing takes a variety of forms. It includes the discovery of talent in a relatively obscure literary magazine or in a "slush pile" of unsolicited manuscripts. It can be a matter of financial and emotional support in difficult times. And, once faced with a manuscript, an editor ordinarily tries to facilitate a writer's vision, to recommend changes—deletions, additions, transpositions—that best serve the work. In the normal course of things, editorial work is relatively subtle, but there are famous instances of heroic assistance: Ezra Pound cutting T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" in half when the poem was still called "He Do the Police in Different Voices"; Maxwell Perkins finding a structure in Thomas Wolfe's "Look Homeward, Angel" and cutting it by sixty-five thousand words.

In the years after the publication of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?," Carver wrote a series of stories dwelling on alcoholism and wrecked marriages.

They were eventually published under a title recommended by Lish: "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." According to the professors William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, who, with the coöperation of Tess Gallagher, have been doing scholarly work on Carver, Lish mailed Carver an edited manuscript in the spring of 1980 containing sixteen of the seventeen stories that eventually appeared in the book. Lish had cut the original manuscript by forty per cent, eliminating what he saw as false lyricism and sentiment. Then, while Carver and Gallagher were attending a writers' conference, Lish edited the manuscript yet again, had it retyped, and sent the pages back to Syracuse, where Carver was now living and teaching. When Carver returned home and read the manuscript, he wrote his forlorn letter to Lish.

In 1998, ten years after Carver's death, the journalist D. T. Max went to the archives at the Lilly Library to examine the Carver-Lish letters. The result was an article in the *Times Magazine* that brought that strange and shifting editorial relationship to public light. But it remains a mystery why, just two days after pleading with Lish to withdraw the book, Carver wrote another letter to him, in a far different mood, calmly discussing relatively minor editorial points, and signing off "with my love." Lish, apparently, had spoken to Carver by telephone and managed to avoid a prolonged crisis.

When "What We Talk About" was published, in April, 1981, it enjoyed enormous critical success, capped off by a front-page review in the *Times Book Review,* a rarity for a collection of short stories. The critic Michael Wood wrote that Carver had "done what many of the most gifted writers fail to do: He has invented a country of his own, like no other except the very world, as Wordsworth said, which is the world of all of us." Wood also wrote, "In Mr. Carver's silences, a good deal of the unsayable gets said." Many of those silences were the result of Lish's editing.

After years of failure, illness, work, and obscurity, Carver naturally relished the reception. The public praise also insured that he kept to himself his ambivalence about the way Lish had edited some of the stories. In Tess Gallagher's view, Lish's work encroached upon Carver's artistic integrity. "What would you do if your book was a success but you didn't want to explain to the public that it had been crammed down your throat?" Gallagher said recently. "He had to carry on. There was no way for him to repudiate the book. To do so would have meant that it would all have to come out in public with Gordon and he was not about to do that. Ray was not a fighter. He would avoid conflict because conflict would drive him to drink."

In the years following the book's publication, Carver seemed determined to keep Lish as a friend and "brother," even as an editor, but he now set stricter editorial boundaries. There was a shift in power. Carver demanded his autonomy. "Gordon, God's truth, and I may as well say it out now," he wrote in August, 1982, about his latest stories. "I can't undergo the kind of surgical amputation and transplant that might make them someway fit into the carton so the lid will close."

Carver's next story collection, "Cathedral," was published in 1983, and was an even greater success, winning praise again on the cover of the *Times Book Review,* this time from Irving Howe, who wrote that in Carver's more expansive later work one saw "a gifted writer struggling for a larger scope of reference, a finer touch of nuance." In an interview with *The Paris Review* that year, Carver made clear that he preferred the new expansiveness: "I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end—writing stuff and publishing stuff I wouldn't want to read myself, and that's the truth. In a review of the last book, somebody called me a 'minimalist' writer. The reviewer meant it as a compliment. But I didn't like it."

Now Tess Gallagher is hoping to republish all the stories in Carver's second book in what she believes is their "true, original" form. The story published here, "Beginners," was the submitted draft of a story that Lish cut by more than a third and retitled "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Gallagher is eager for people to read "Beginners." And yet Lish's work helped transform a more conventional story into an exemplar of an astringent and original aesthetic—the aesthetic that helped win Carver his initial following. "I see what it is that you've done, what you've pulled out of it," Carver wrote to Lish about "Beginners" in his long, aggrieved letter, "and I'm awed and astonished, startled even, with your insights." Carver may well have regretted, to some degree, the way a number of his stories appeared in "What We Talk About," and, in the compendium "Where I'm Calling From," which appeared a few months before he died, he republished three stories in their "original" form. But most of the stories, including this one, he republished as Lish had edited them.

"An editorial relationship is a private one, and nobody can see it fully and completely," Gary Fisketjon, an editor who helped Carver make the selections for "Where I'm Calling From," said recently. "Clearly, there was a catastrophic breakdown here that's interesting but ultimately unknowable." What can be known is that, by the mid-nineteen-eighties, Carver's relationship with Lish was at an end. Lish told D. T. Max, "I don't like talking about the Carver period, because of my sustained sense of his betrayal, and because it seems bad form to discuss this." Gallagher, for her part, thought that Lish had been claiming too much credit for Carver's achievements.

In 1987, Carver wrote "Errand," a story about the death of Chekhov, his literary idol. It was published in *The New Yorker.* The same year, Carver, like Chekhov, began spitting up blood. Carver had always been, he once said, "a cigarette with a body attached to it," and he was found to have lung cancer. He and Gallagher bought a house on the Olympia Peninsula overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and they married on June 17, 1988. Some mornings, Carver tried to write, despite his illness. "But I get so awful tired," he said. He died on August 2nd. He was fifty years old, and "Errand" was his last story. ♦

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A line-by-line comparison of Raymond Carver's "Beginners" and Gordon Lish's edit.

LETTERS TO AN EDITOR

Following are excerpts from Carver's correspondence with Lish, from 1969 to 1983.

November 12, 1969

Well, as it happens I do have a few stories on hand, and I'm sending them along within the next day or two. I hope you can find something you like.

July 15, 1970

Hombre, thanks for the superb assist on the stories. No one has done that for me since I was 18, I mean it. High time I think, too. Feel the stories are first class now, but whatever the outcome there, I appreciate the fine eye you turned on them. Hang tough.

January 19, 1971

I think it's a fine story. Took about all yr changes, added a few things here and there. Hope to get it retyped by this evening and back off to you. No later than tomorrow, sure. Thanks for going over it.—Listen, something you said a long time ago, the thing itself is what matters. Is true, in the end. I'm not bothered. I've always been the slowest kid in class anyway, right down there. But I keep trying, even at this advanced age. So lean on it, if you see things. If I don't agree, I'll say something, never fear.

November 11, 1974

Well, listen, can't exactly tell you how pleased and so on about the prospects of having a collection out under your aegis . . . along with McGraw-Hill, of course. First reaction was to run out and buy two bottles of champagne for a champagne breakfast. . . . But all that is neither here nor there. What I'm concerned about and thrilled about is having out a book of stories, & from there on I intend, brother, to set the globe afire, believe me. . . . I'll tell you this, you've not backed a bad horse. . . . About the editing necessary in some of the stories. Tell me which ones and I'll go after it, or them. Tell me which ones. Or I will leave it up to you & you tell me what you think needs done or doing.

September 27, 1977

The most wonderful thing about this stay in McKinleyville, though, is that I've got sober and intend to stay that way. I've never done anything in my life I've felt so good about as getting and staying sober. What can I say? [Lish had left *Esquire*.] You've made a single-handed impression on American letters that has helped fix the course of American letters. And, of course, you know, old bean, just what an influence you've exercised on my life. Just knowing you were there, at your desk, was an inspiration for me to write, and you know I mean that. You, my friend, are my idea of an ideal reader, always have been, always, that is, forever, will be. So you loomed large on the literary scene, and that is a fact, as well as a truth, but you loomed large in my conscious and unconscious life as well.

September 8, 1978

Tess Gallagher, that Irish lass, I like to have fallen in love with her. She left, went to Tucson on business—she'll be teaching there next year, she's on a Guggy this year—then returned and we spent a fine week together, I put her on a plane to Seattle yesterday, today I get a dozen red roses from her.

February 1, 1979

I'm going to Mardi Gras with Tess; and the Fords are coming down in March for spring break and we're going into Mexico by train for a week. . . . I'm happy, and I'm sober. It's aces right now, Gordon. I know better than anyone a fellow is never out of the woods, but right now it's aces, and I'm enjoying it.

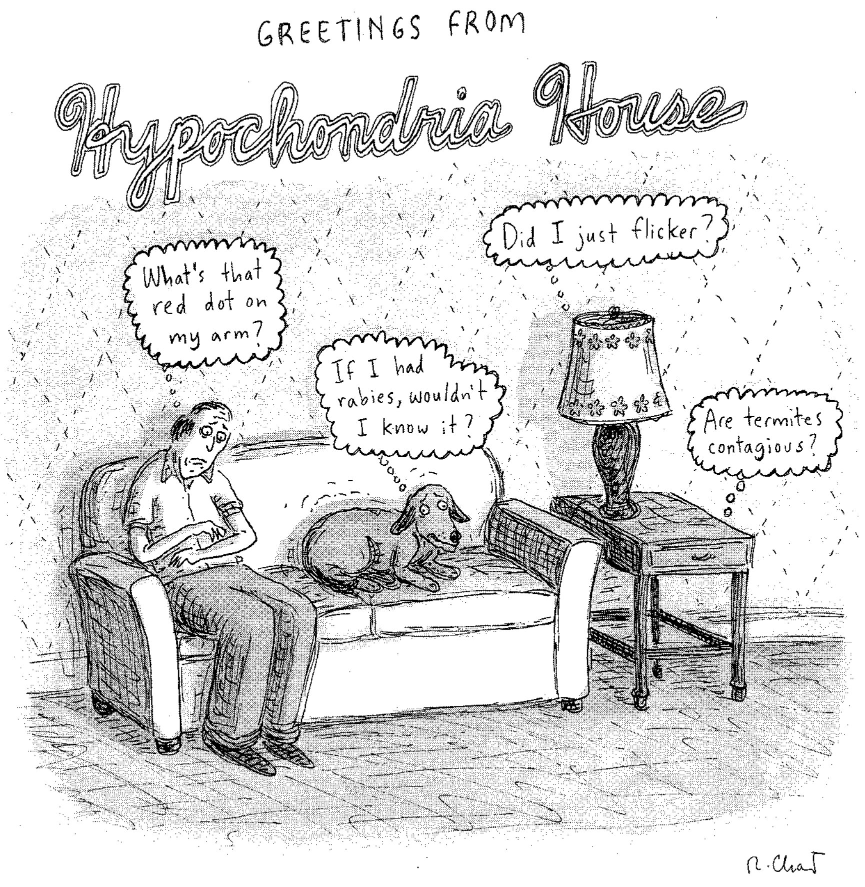
May 10, 1980

As for lunch, lord, it was the high point of my visit to NYC, nothing mindless or silly, at least not on your part. I delight in your company, simple as that. You know, I feel closer to you than I do to my own brother. Have for a long time, years. We don't see each other that often, or talk on the phone weekly, etc., but I know you're there and it's important to me. Besides, you're my hero—don't you know? Ever since you left PA [Palo Alto] and went out into the Great World and began sending me messages back from time to time what it was like out there. Your friendship and your concern have enriched my life. There's no question of your importance to me. You're my mainstay. Man, I love you. I don't make that declaration lightly either. . . . For Christ's sweet sake, not to worry about taking a pencil to the stories if you can make them better; and if anyone can you can. I want them to be the best possible stories, and I want them to be around for a while. . . . I never figured I was going to get rich or even earn a living writing stories and poems. Be enough, you know, to have Knopf do a book of mine and have you as my editor. So open the throttle. Ramming speed.

July 8, 1980, 8 A.M.

Dearest Gordon,

I've got to pull out of this one. Please hear me. I've been up all night thinking on this, and nothing but this, so help me. I've looked at it from every side, I've compared both versions of the edited mss—the first one is better, I truly believe, if some things are carried over from the second to the first—until my eyes are nearly to fall out of my head. You are a wonder, a genius, and there's no doubt of that, better than


GREETINGS FROM
Hypochondria House
What's that red dot on my arm?
Did I just flicker?
If I had rabies, wouldn't I know it?
Are termites contagious?
R. Chast

any two of Max Perkins, etc., etc. And I’m not unmindful of the fact of my immense debt to you, a debt I can simply never, never repay. This whole new life I have, so many of the friends I now have, this job up here, everything, I owe to you for “Will You Please.” You’ve given me some degree of immortality already. You’ve made so many of the stories in this collection better, far better than they were before. And maybe if I were alone, by myself, and no one had ever seen these stories, maybe then, knowing that your versions are better than some of the ones I had sent, maybe I could get into this and go with it. But Tess has seen all of these and gone over them closely. Donald Hall has seen many of the new ones (and discussed them at length with me and offered his services in reviewing the collection) and Richard Ford, Toby Wolff, Geoffrey Wolff, too, some of them. . . . How can I explain to these fellows when I see them, as I will see them, what happened to the story in the meantime, after its book publication? Maybe if the book were not to come out for 18 months or two years, it would be different. But right now, everything is too new. . . . Gordon, the changes are brilliant and for the better in most cases—I look at “What We Talk About . . .” (Beginners) and I see what it is that you’ve done, what you’ve pulled out of it, and I’m awed and astonished, startled even, with your insights. But it’s too close right now, that story. Now much of this has to do with my sobriety and with my new-found (and fragile, I see) mental health and well-being. I’ll tell you the truth, my very sanity is on the line here. I don’t want to sound melodramatic here, but I’ve come back from the grave here to start writing stories once more. As I think you may know, I’d given up entirely, thrown it in and was looking forward to dying, that release. But I kept thinking, I’ll wait until after the election to kill myself, or wait until after this or that happened, usually something down the road a ways, but it was never far from my mind in those dark days, not all that long ago. Now, I’m incomparably better, I have my health back, money in the bank, the right woman for this time of my life, a decent job, blah blah. But I haven’t written a word since I gave you the collection, waiting for your reaction, that reaction means so much to me. Now, I’m afraid, mortally afraid, I feel it, that if the book were to be published as it is in its present edited form, I may never write another story, that’s how closely, God Forbid, some of those stories are to my sense of regaining my health and mental well-being. . . .

Please help me with this, Gordon. I feel as if this is the most important decision I’ve ever been faced with, no shit. I ask for your understanding. Next to my wife, and now Tess, you have been and are the most important individual in my life, and that’s the truth. I don’t want to lose your love or regard over this, oh God no. It would be like having a part of myself die, a spiritual part. Jesus, I’m jabbering now. But if this causes you undue complication and grief and you perhaps understandably become pissed and discouraged with me, well, I’m the poorer for it, and my life will not be the same again. True. On the other hand, if the book comes out and I can’t feel the kind of pride and pleasure in it that I want, if I feel I’ve somehow too far stepped out of bounds, crossed that line a little too far, why then I can’t feel good about myself, or maybe even write again; right now I feel it’s that serious, and if I can’t feel absolutely good about it, I feel I’d be done for. I do. Lord God I just don’t know what else to say. I’m awash with confusion and paranoia. Fatigue too, that too.

Please, Gordon, for God’s sake help me in this and try to understand. Listen. I’ll say it again, if I have any standing or reputation or credibility in the world, I owe it to you. I owe you this more-or-less pretty interesting life I have. But if I go ahead with this as it is, it will not be good for me. The book will not be, as it should, a cause for joyous celebration, but one of defense and explanation. . . . I know that the discomfort of this decision of mine is at its highest now, it’s rampant, I feel nearly wild with it. But I know it will cause you grief as well, explanations, more work, stopping everything in its tracks and coming up with valid reasons for why. But, eventually, my discomfort and yours, will go away, there’ll be a grieving, I’m grieving right now, but it will go away. But if I don’t speak now, and speak from the heart, and halt things now, I foresee a terrible time ahead for me. The demons I have to deal with every day, or night, nearly, might, I’m afraid, simply rise up and take me over.

Of course I know I shouldn't have signed the contract without first reading the collection and making my fears, if any, known to you beforehand, before signing. So what should we do now, please advise? Can you lay it all on me and get me out of the contract someway? Can you put the book off until Winter or Spring of 1982 and let them know I want to have the stories in the collection published in magazines first (and that's the truth, several of them are committed to places with publication way off next year)? Tell them I want the magazine publications first, and then the book out when I'm up for tenure here that spring of 1982? And then decide next year what, for sure, to do? Or else can or should everything just be stopped now, I send back the Knopf check, if it's on the way, or else you stop it there? And meanwhile I pay you for the hours, days and nights, I'm sure, you've spent on this. Goddamn it, I'm just nearly crazy with this. I'm getting into a state over it. — No, I don't think it shd. be put off. I think it had best be stopped.

I thought the editing, especially in the first version, was brilliant, as I said. The stories I can't let go of in their entirety are these. "Community Center" (If It Please You) and "The Bath" (A Small Good Thing) and I'd want some more of the old couple, Anna and Henry Gates, in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (Beginners). I would not want "Mr. Fixit" (Where Is Everyone) in the book in its present state. The story "Distance" should not have its title changed to "Everything Stuck to Him." Nor the little piece "Mine" to "Popular Mechanics." "Dummy" should keep its title. "A Serious Talk" is fine for "Pie." I think "Want to See Something" is fine, is better than "I Could See the Smallest Things." . . .

I'm just much too close to all of this right now. It's even hard for me to think right now. I think, in all, maybe it's just too soon for me for another collection. I know that next spring is too soon in any case. Absolutely too soon. I think I had best pull out, Gordon, before it goes any further. I realize I stand every chance of losing your love and friendship over this. But I strongly feel I stand every chance of losing my soul and my mental health over it, if I don't take that risk. I'm still in the process of recovery and trying to get well from the alcoholism, and I just can't take any chances, something as momentous and permanent as this, that would put my head in some jeopardy. That's it, it's in my head. You have made so many of these stories better, my God, with the lighter editing and trimming. But those others, those three, I guess, I'm liable to croak if they came out that way. Even though they may be closer to works of art than the original and people be reading them 50 years from now, they're still apt to cause my demise, I'm serious, they're so intimately hooked up with my getting well, recovering, gaining back some little self-esteem and feeling of worth as a writer and a human being.

I know you must feel angry and betrayed and pissed off. God's sake, I'm sorry. I can pay you for the time you've put in on this, but I can't begin to help or do anything about the trouble and grief I may be causing there in the editorial and business offices that you'll have to go through. Forgive me for this, please. But I'm just going to have to wait a while yet for another book, 18 months, two years, it's okay now, as long as I'm writing and have some sense of worth in the process. Your friendship and your concern and general championing of me have meant, and mean still, more to me than I can ever say. I could never begin to repay you, as you must know. I honor and respect you, and I love you more than my brother. But you will have to get me off the hook here Gordon, it's true. I just can't go another step forward with this endeavor. So please advise what to do now. . . . As I say, I'm confused, tired, paranoid, and afraid, yes, of the consequences for me if the collection came out in its present form. So help me, please, yet again. Don't, please, make this too hard for me, for I'm just likely to start coming unraveled knowing how I've displeased and disappointed you. God almighty, Gordon.

Ray

Please do the necessary things to stop production of the book. Please try and forgive me, this breach.

July 10, 1980

Please look through the enclosed copy of "What We Talk About," the entire collection. You'll see that nearly all of the changes I suggest are small enough, but I think they're significant and they all can be found in the first edited ms version you sent me. It's just, not just, but it's a question of reinstating some of the things that were taken out in the second version. But I feel strongly some of those things taken out should be back in the finished stories. "Gazebo," for instance. "In this, too, she was right." That ending is far superior and gives the story the right, the just ending, the narrator's sense of loss, and a sharp, perfect ending for the story. Otherwise, the narrator is a lout, a son of a bitch, and totally insensitive to everything he's been telling us. Otherwise, why even is he telling the story, I wonder.

July 14, 1980

I'm thrilled about the book and its impending publication. I'm stoked about it, and I'm already starting to think about the next one. More than thinking about it, in fact. Fact is, I'm giving some thought to taking the second semester off to do nothing but write and write through the summer as well. . . . Things are in full swing, and I am just generally excited, specifically too. I know you have my best interests at heart, and you'll do everything and more to further those interests. . . . I won't harp or dog, for I know the book is going to astonish and give pleasure. So just these last words on the matter: please look at the suggestions I've penciled in and entertain those suggestions seriously, even if finally you decide otherwise; if you think I'm being my own worst enemy, you know, well then, stick to the final version of the second edited version. But do give those things a hard third or fourth look. My greatest fear is, or was, having them too pared, and I'm thinking of "Community Center" and "The Bath" both of which lost several pages each in the second editing. I want that sense of beauty and mystery they have now, but I don't want to lose track, lose touch with the little human connections I saw in the first version you sent me. They seemed somehow to be fuller in the best sense, in that first ed. version. Maybe I am wrong in this, maybe you are 100% correct, just please give them another hard look. That's all. That and what I said about "Where Is Everyone?"—Mr. Coffee, Mr. Fixit.

August 11, 1982

Now I don't know for sure how we're going to work out some of the disagreements we're bound to have over some of these stories I've written and am writing this very minute. And I'm going to give you the book ["Cathedral"] on schedule, in November. . . . Anyway, you're the best editor there is, and a writer yourself, you bet, and you have to call them the way you see them. Fair enough. But I may not be in agreement with you, and this is what's worrying me right this minute. . . .

Forgive me. But hear me out. I'm saying that despite all and fuck all, I've been writing short stories ever since I landed out here in this woodsy cranny. I've got five new ones, no six, counting the one I just typed out a second draft of earlier tonight and hope to finish, at least have some more drafts of, before the week is out. I've been writing as if my life depended on it and like there's no tomorrow. And we both know that first may be true, and there's always likelihood of the second. (And fuck no, I can't get off the cigarettes either.) . . . But one thing is certain—the stories in this new collection are going to be *fuller* than the ones in the earlier books. And this, for Christ's sake, is to the good. I'm not the same writer I used to be. But I know there are going to be stories in these 14 or 15 I give you that you're going to draw back from, that aren't going to fit anyone's notion of what a Carver short story ought to be—yours, mine, the reading public at large, the critics. But I'm not them, I'm not us, I'm me. Some of these stories may not fit smoothly or neatly, inevitably, alongside the rest. But, Gordon, God's truth, and I may as well say it out now, I can't undergo the kind of surgical amputation and transplant that might make them someway fit into the carton so the lid will close. There may have to be limbs and heads of hair sticking out. My heart won't take it otherwise. It will simply burst, and I mean that. Dearest friend of all, brother, you know what I'm saying, and I know you understand. Even if you think I'm dead wrong. . . .

I love your heart, you must know that. But I can't write these stories and have to feel inhibited—if I feel inhibited I'm not going to write them at all—and feel that if you, the reader I want to please more than any, don't like them, you're going to re-write them from top to bottom. Why, if I think that the pen will fall right out of my fingers, and I may not be able to pick it up. . . .

You understand I'm not saying, or even remotely thinking, that these new and year-old stories are beyond criticism, or that they won't need editing. Not true. Not true in either case. You're as close to me, and my work, you couldn't be closer, if you were my blood brother. You're the left side of me. Or the right side, take your pick. But I guess I'm trying to say here that we're going to have to work very closely together on this book—the most important book of them all for me, at every stage, and be careful and understanding with each other. Gordon, the last book passed as if in a dream for me. This one can't go that way, and we both know it.

October 3, 1982

Listen, I've finished work on the new Knopf book of stories. Last week I got them all back from the typist and I spent all day today reading them through. It's going to be something, that book. I thought I would try and put them in order, the order I'd like to see them in the book, but just a few minutes ago gave up on that. I'll leave that up to you. I don't have a title, either. We talked, a year ago, about calling the book "Cathedral." That's fine with me and maybe lead off with that story and finish with "Fever," a long story, or "A Small Good Thing," another long story. But I will leave the arrangement of the stories up to you. You know I want and have to have autonomy on this book and that the stories have to come out looking very essentially the way they look right now. I'm of course not saying we can't change words or phrases or a line here and there, and punctuation, sure. But after you've read the book, I'll come down and we'll talk about titles, the ordering, or any suggestions you might have.

October 29, 1982

As I said before, I would be happy with either title, "Cathedral" or "Where I'm Calling From." . . . My biggest concern, as you know, is that the stories remain intact. Oh, Christ, sure, you know, if you see some words or sentences that can be trimmed, that's fine, trim them. You know what I'm saying. Please help me with this book as a good editor, the best . . . but not as my ghost. I tell you, I may be reading it all wrong—and if I am, I don't care, in a very profound way—but I think there is a great deal of good will established toward me, or for me; and this book, the stories, are going to be so different, in so many regards, from so many of the earlier stories, that the book is going to be met with a good show of enthusiasm, even celebration. And, yes, I'm eager to have that artist you were talking about do something for the cover, if she can. Yes, for sure. I hope that works out. (But that, finally, will be *your* final decision; the matter of the text, in this case, has to be mine.)

November 19, 1982

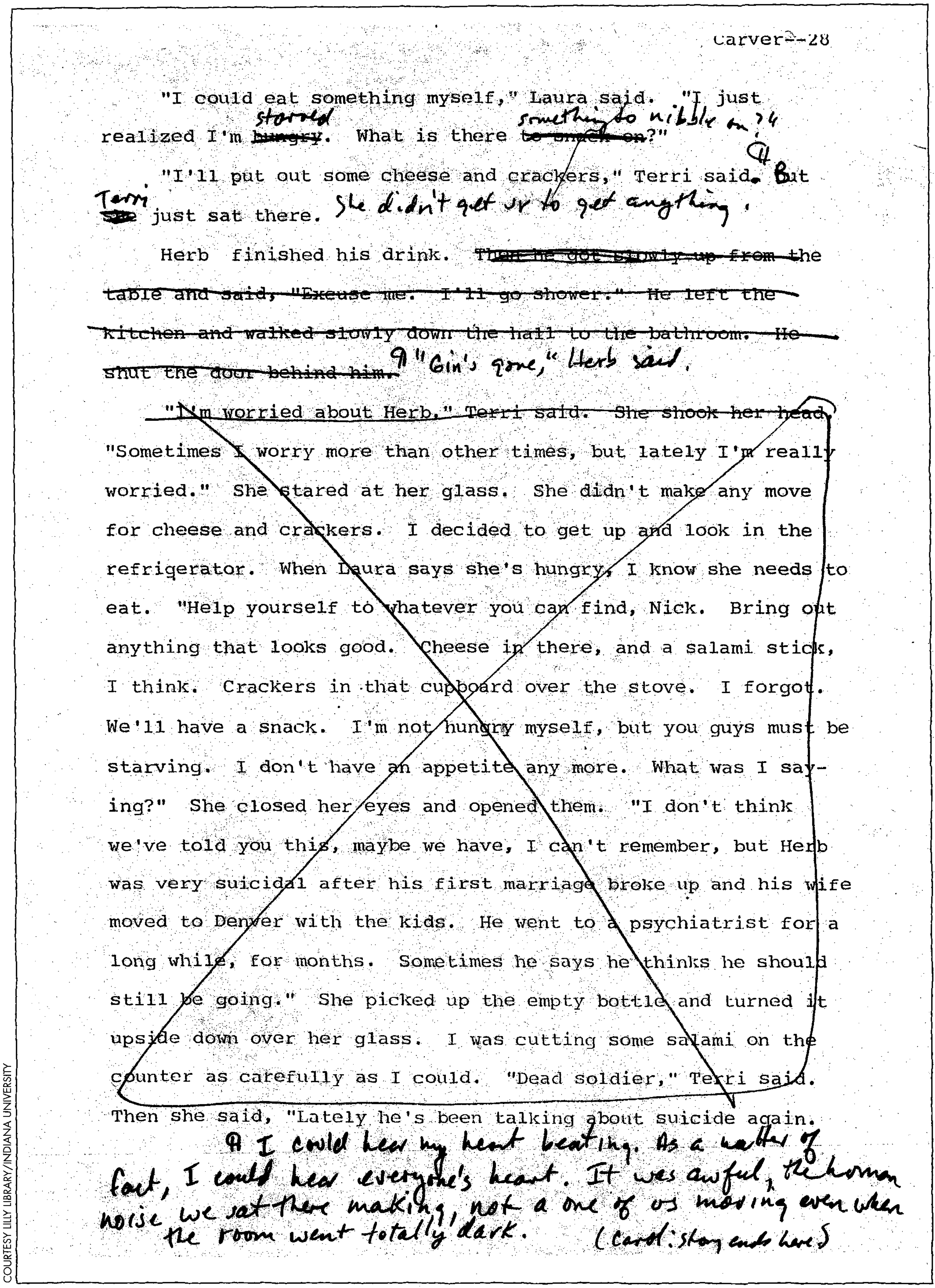
From Lish to Carver

Dear Ray—Here's "Where I'm Calling From" reworked to the extent that I think it must be—as basic as I can keep it. I'm aware that we've agreed that I will try to keep my editing of the stories as slight as I deem possible, that you do not want me to do the extensive work I did on the first two collections. So be it, Ray. What you see in this sample is that minimum: to do less than this, would be, in my judgment, to expose you too greatly. At all events, look: if this is in keeping with your wishes, call quickly and say so—and I will then be guided thereby in my handling of the rest of the stories. Love, G.

January 21, 1983

From Carver to Lish

What's the matter, don't you love me anymore? I never hear from you. Have you forgotten me already? Well, I'm going back to the [*Paris Review*] interview and take out all the good things I said about you. ♦



Carver--28

"I could eat something myself," Laura said. "I just realized I'm ~~hungry~~ starved. What is there ~~to snack on~~ something to nibble on?"

"I'll put out some cheese and crackers," Terri said. ¶ But ~~She~~ Terri just sat there. She didn't get up to get anything.

Herb finished his drink. ~~Then he got slowly up from the table and said, "Excuse me. I'll go shower." He left the kitchen and walked slowly down the hall to the bathroom. He shut the door behind him.~~ ¶ "Gin's gone," Herb said.

"I'm worried about Herb," ~~Terri said. She shook her head. "Sometimes I worry more than other times, but lately I'm really worried." She stared at her glass. She didn't make any move for cheese and crackers. I decided to get up and look in the refrigerator. When Laura says she's hungry, I know she needs to eat. "Help yourself to whatever you can find, Nick. Bring out anything that looks good. Cheese in there, and a salami stick, I think. Crackers in that cupboard over the stove. I forgot. We'll have a snack. I'm not hungry myself, but you guys must be starving. I don't have an appetite any more. What was I saying?" She closed her eyes and opened them. "I don't think we've told you this, maybe we have, I can't remember, but Herb was very suicidal after his first marriage broke up and his wife moved to Denver with the kids. He went to a psychiatrist for a long while, for months. Sometimes he says he thinks he should still be going." She picked up the empty bottle and turned it upside down over her glass. I was cutting some salami on the counter as carefully as I could. "Dead soldier," Terri said.~~ Then she said, "Lately he's been talking about suicide again.

¶ I could hear my heart beating. As a matter of fact, I could hear everyone's heart. It was awful, the human noise we sat there making, not a one of us moving even when the room went totally dark. (Carol: story ends here)

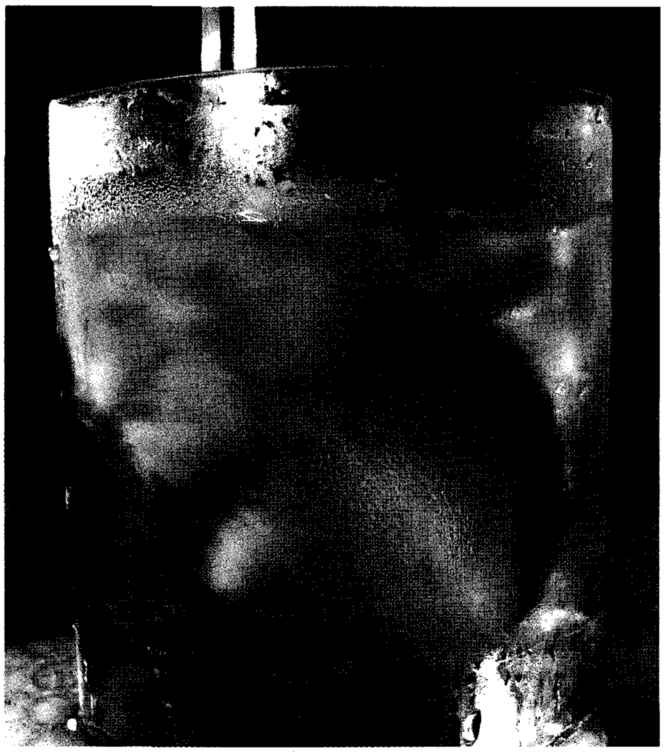
COURTESY LILLY LIBRARY/INDIANA UNIVERSITY

The ending of the story as Lish edited it. Lish reduced Carver's manuscript by forty per cent.

FICTION

BEGINNERS

BY RAYMOND CARVER



JESSICA HINES (2007)

My friend Herb McGinnis, a cardiologist, was talking. The four of us were sitting around his kitchen table drinking gin. It was Saturday afternoon. Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink. There were Herb and I and his second wife, Teresa—Terri, we called her—and my wife, Laura. We lived in Albuquerque, but we were all from somewhere else. There was an ice bucket on the table. The gin and the tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of love. Herb thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love. When he was young he'd spent five years in a seminary before quitting to go to medical school. He'd left the Church at the same time, but he said he still looked back to those years in the seminary as the most important in his life.

Terri said the man she lived with before she lived with Herb loved her so much he tried to kill her. Herb laughed after she said this. He made a face. Terri looked at him. Then she said, "He beat me up one night, the last night we lived together. He dragged me around the living room by my ankles, all the while saying, 'I love you, don't you see? I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room, my head knocking on things." She looked around the table at us and then looked at her hands on her glass. "What do you do with love like that?" she said. She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendant earrings. She was fifteen years younger than Herb, had suffered periods of anorexia, and during the late sixties, before she'd gone to nursing school, had been a dropout, a "street person," as she put it. Herb sometimes called her, affectionately, his hippie.

"My God, don't be silly. That's not love, and you know it," Herb said. "I don't know what you'd call it—madness is what I'd call it—but it's sure as hell not love."

"Say what you want to, but I know he loved me," Terri said. "I know he did. It may sound crazy to you, but it's true just the same. People are different, Herb. Sure, sometimes he may have acted crazy. O.K. But he loved me. In his own way, maybe, but he loved me. There was love there, Herb. Don't deny me that."

Herb let out breath. He held his glass and turned to Laura and me. "He threatened to kill *me*, too." He finished his drink and reached for the gin bottle. "Terri's a romantic. Terri's of the 'Kick-me-so-I'll-know-you-love-me' school. Terri, hon, don't look that way." He reached across the table and touched her cheek with his fingers. He grinned at her.

"Now he wants to make up," Terri said. "After he tries to dump on me." She wasn't smiling.

"Make up what?" Herb said. "What is there to make up? I know what I know, and that's all."

"What would you call it then?" Terri said. "How'd we get started on this subject anyway?" She raised her glass and drank. "Herb always has love on his mind," she said. "Don't you, honey?" She smiled now, and I thought that was the last of it.

"I just wouldn't call Carl's behavior love, that's all I'm saying, honey," Herb said. "What about you guys?" he said to Laura and me. "Does that sound like love to you?"

I shrugged. "I'm the wrong person to ask. I didn't even know the man. I've only heard his name mentioned in passing. Carl. I wouldn't know. You'd have to know all the particulars. Not in my book it isn't, but who's to say? There're lots of different ways of behaving and showing affection. That way doesn't happen to be mine. But what you're saying, Herb, is that love is an absolute?"

"The kind of love I'm talking about is," Herb said. "The kind of love I'm talking about, you don't try to kill people."

Laura, my sweet, big Laura, said evenly, "I don't know anything about Carl, or anything about the situation. Who can judge anyone else's situation? But, Terri, I didn't know about the violence."

I touched the back of Laura's hand.

She gave me a quick smile, then turned her gaze back to Terri. I picked up Laura's hand. The hand was warm to the touch, the nails polished, perfectly manicured. I encircled the broad wrist with my fingers, like a bracelet, and held her.

"When I left he drank rat poison," Terri said. She clasped her arms with her hands. "They took him to the hospital in Santa Fe where we lived then and they saved his life, and his gums separated. I mean they pulled away from his teeth. After that his teeth stood out like fangs. My God," she said. She waited a minute, then let go of her arms and picked up her glass.

"What people won't do!" Laura said. "I'm sorry for him and I don't even think I like him. Where is he now?"

"He's out of the action," Herb said. "He's dead." He handed me the saucer of limes. I took a section of lime, squeezed it over my drink, and stirred the ice cubes with my finger.

"It gets worse," Terri said. "He shot himself in the mouth, but he bungled that, too. Poor Carl," she said. She shook her head.

"Poor Carl nothing," Herb said. "He was dangerous." Herb was forty-five years old. He was tall and rangy with wavy, graying hair. His face and arms were brown from the tennis he played. When he was sober, his gestures, all his movements, were precise and careful.

"He did love me, though, Herb, grant me that," Terri said. "That's all I'm asking. He didn't love me the way you love me, I'm not saying that. But he loved me. You can grant me that, can't you? That's not much to ask."

"What do you mean, 'He bungled it'?" I asked. Laura leaned forward with her glass. She put her elbows on the table and held her glass in both hands. She glanced from Herb to Terri and waited with a look of bewilderment on her open face, as if amazed that such things happened to people you knew. Herb finished his drink. "How'd he bungle it when he killed himself?" I said again.

"I'll tell you what happened," Herb said. "He took this .22 pistol he'd bought to threaten Terri and me with—oh, I'm serious, he wanted to use it. You should have seen the way we lived in those days. Like fugitives. I even bought a gun myself, and I thought I was a nonviolent sort. But I bought a gun for self-defense and carried it in the glove compartment. Sometimes I'd have to leave the apartment in the middle of the night, you know, to go to the hospital. Terri and I weren't married then and my first wife had the house and kids, the dog, everything, and Terri and I were living in this apartment. Sometimes, as I say, I'd get a call in the middle of the night and have to go in to the hospital at two or three in the morning. It'd be dark out there in the parking lot and I'd break into a sweat before I could even get to my car. I never knew if he was going to come up out of the shrubbery or from behind a car and start shooting. I mean, he was crazy. He was capable of wiring a bomb to my car, anything. He used to call my answering service at all hours and say he needed to talk to the doctor, and when I'd return the call he'd say, 'Son of a bitch, your days are numbered.' Little things like that. It was scary, I'm telling you."

"I still feel sorry for him," Terri said. She sipped her drink and gazed at Herb. Herb stared back.

"It sounds like a nightmare," Laura said. "But what exactly happened after he shot himself?" Laura is a legal secretary. We'd met in a professional capacity, lots of other people around, but we'd talked and I'd asked her to have dinner with me. Before we knew it, it was a courtship. She's thirty-five, three years younger than I am. In addition to being in love, we like each other and enjoy one another's company. She's easy to be with. "What happened?" Laura asked again.

Herb waited a minute and turned the glass in his hand. Then he said, "He shot himself in the mouth in his room. Someone heard the shot and told the manager. They came in with a passkey, saw what had happened, and called an ambulance. I happened to be there when they brought him in to the emergency room. I was there on another case. He was still alive, but beyond anything anyone could do for him. Still, he lived for three days. I'm serious, though, his head swelled up to twice the size of a normal head. I'd never seen anything like it, and I hope I never do again. Terri wanted to go in and sit with him when she found out about it. We had a fight over it. I didn't think she'd want to see him like that. I didn't think she should see him, and I still don't."

"Who won the fight?" Laura said.

"I was in the room with him when he died," Terri said. "He never regained consciousness, and there was no hope for him, but I sat with him. He didn't have anyone else."

"He was dangerous," Herb said. "If you call that love, you can have it."

"It was love," Terri said. "Sure it was abnormal in most people's eyes, but he was willing to die for it. He did die for it."

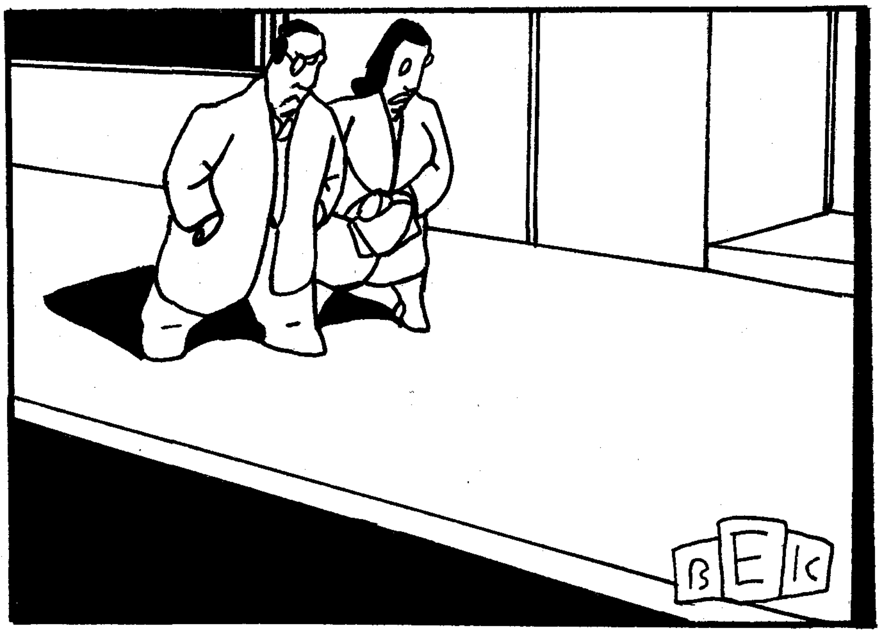
"I sure as hell wouldn't call it love," Herb said. "You don't know what he died for. I've seen a lot of suicides, and I couldn't say anyone close to them ever knew for sure. And when they claimed to be the cause, well I don't know." He put his hands behind his neck and leaned on the back legs of his chair. "I'm not interested in that kind of love. If that's love, you can have it."

After a minute, Terri said, "We were afraid. Herb even made a will out and wrote to his brother in California who used to be a Green Beret. He told him who to look for if something happened to him mysteriously. Or not so mysteriously!" She shook her head and laughed at it now. She drank from her glass. She went on. "But we did live a little like fugitives. We *were* afraid of him, no question. I even called the police at one point, but they were no help. They said they couldn't do anything to him, they couldn't arrest him or do anything unless he actually *did* something to Herb. Isn't that a laugh?" Terri said. She poured the last of the gin into her glass and wagged the bottle. Herb got up from the table and went to the cupboard. He took down another bottle of gin.

"Well, Nick and I are in love," Laura said. "Aren't we, Nick?" She bumped my knee with her knee. "You're supposed to say something now," she said, and turned a large smile on me. "We get along really well, I think. We like doing things together, and neither of us has beaten up on the other yet, thank God. Knock on wood. I'd say we're pretty happy. I guess we should count our blessings."

For answer, I took her hand and raised it to my lips with a flourish. I made a production out of kissing her hand. Everyone was amused. "We're lucky," I said.

"You guys," Terri said. "Stop that now. You're making me sick! You're still



"Sometimes it seems like you don't want to talk about baby strollers."

on a honeymoon, that's why you can act like this. You're still gaga over each other yet. Just wait. How long have you been together now? How long has it been? A year? Longer than a year."

"Going on a year and a half," Laura said, still flushed and smiling.

"You're still on the honeymoon," Terri said again. "Wait a while." She held her drink and gazed at Laura. "I'm only kidding," she said.

Herb had opened the gin and gone around the table with the bottle. "Terri, Jesus, you shouldn't talk like that, even if you're not serious, even if you are kidding. It's bad luck. Here, you guys. Let's have a toast. I want to propose a toast. A toast to love. True love," Herb said. We touched glasses.

"To love," we said.

Outside, in the back yard, one of the dogs began to bark. The leaves of the aspen tree that leaned past the window flickered in the breeze. The afternoon sunlight was like a presence in the room. There was suddenly a feeling of ease and generosity around the table, of friendship and comfort. We could have been anywhere. We raised our glasses again and grinned at each other like children who had agreed on something for once.

"I'll tell you what real love is," Herb said finally, breaking the spell. "I mean I'll give you a good example of it, and then you can draw your own conclusions." He poured a little more gin into his glass. He added an ice cube and a piece of lime. We waited and sipped our drinks. Laura and I touched knees again. I put a hand on her warm thigh and left it there.

"What do any of us really know about love?" Herb said. "I kind of mean what I'm saying, too, if you'll pardon me for saying it. But it seems to me we're just rank beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don't doubt it. We love each other and we love hard, all of us. I love Terri and Terri loves me, and you guys love each other. You know the kind of love I'm talking about now. Sexual love, that attraction to the other person, the partner, as well as just the plain everyday kind of love, love of the other person's being, the loving to be with the other, the little things that make up everyday love. Carnal love, then and, well, call it sentimental love, the day-to-day caring about the other. But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife, too. But I did, I know I did. So I guess before you can say anything, I *am* like Terri in that regard. Terri and Carl." He thought about it a minute and then went on, "But at one time I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself, and we had the kids together. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you figure that? What happened to that love? Did that love just get erased from the big board, as if it was never up there, as if it never happened? What happened to it is what I'd like to know. I wish someone could tell me. Then there's Carl. O.K., we're back to Carl. He loved Terri so much he tries to kill her and winds up killing himself." He stopped talking and shook his head. "You guys have been together eighteen months and you love each other, it shows all over you, you simply glow with it, but you've loved other people, too, before you met each other. You've both been married before, just like us. And you probably loved other people before that. Terri and I have been together five years, been married for four. And the terrible thing, the terrible thing is, but the good thing, too, the saving grace, you might say, is that if something happened to one of us—excuse me for saying this—but if something happened to one of us tomorrow, I think the other one, the other partner, would mourn for a while, you know, but then the surviving party would go out and love again, have someone else soon enough and all this, all of this love—Jesus, how can you figure it?—it would just be memory. Maybe not even memory. Maybe that's the way it's supposed to be. But am I wrong? Am I way off base? I know that's what would happen with us, with Terri and me, as much as we may love each other. With any one of us for that matter. I'll stick my neck out that much. We've all proved it anyhow. I just don't understand. Set me straight if you think I'm wrong. I want to know. I don't know anything, and I'm the first to admit it."

"Herb, for God's sake," Terri said. "This is depressing stuff. This could get very depressing. Even if you think it's true," she said, "it's still depressing." She reached out to him and took hold of his forearm near the wrist. "Are you getting drunk, Herb? Honey, are you drunk?"

"Honey, I'm just talking, all right," Herb said. "I don't have to be drunk to say what's on my mind, do I? I'm not drunk. We're just talking, right?" Herb said. Then his voice changed. "But if I want to get drunk I will, God damn it. I can do anything I want today." He fixed his eyes on her.

"Honey, I'm not criticizing," she said. She picked up her glass.

"I'm not on call today," Herb said. "I can do anything I want today. I'm just tired, that's all."

"Herb, we love you," Laura said.

Herb looked at Laura. It was as if he couldn't place her for a minute. She kept looking at him, holding her smile. Her cheeks were flushed and the sun was hitting her in the eyes, so she squinted to see him. His features relaxed. "Love you, too, Laura. And you, Nick. I'll tell you, you're our pals," Herb said. He picked up his glass. "Well, what was I saying? Yeah. I wanted to tell you about something that happened a while back. I think I wanted to prove a point, and I will if I can just tell this thing the way it happened. This happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now. You might say that, yeah. But it ought to make us all feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we were talking about, when we talk about love."

"Herb, come on now," Terri said. "You are too drunk. Don't talk like this. Don't talk like you're drunk if you're not drunk."

"Just shut up for a minute, will you?" Herb said. "Let me tell this. It's been on my mind. Just shut up for a minute. I told you a little about it when it first happened. That old couple who got into an accident out on the interstate? A kid hit them, and they were all battered up and not given much chance to pull through. Let me tell this, Terri. Now just shut up for a minute. O.K.?"

Terri looked at us and then looked back at Herb. She seemed anxious, that's the only word for it. Herb handed the bottle around the table.

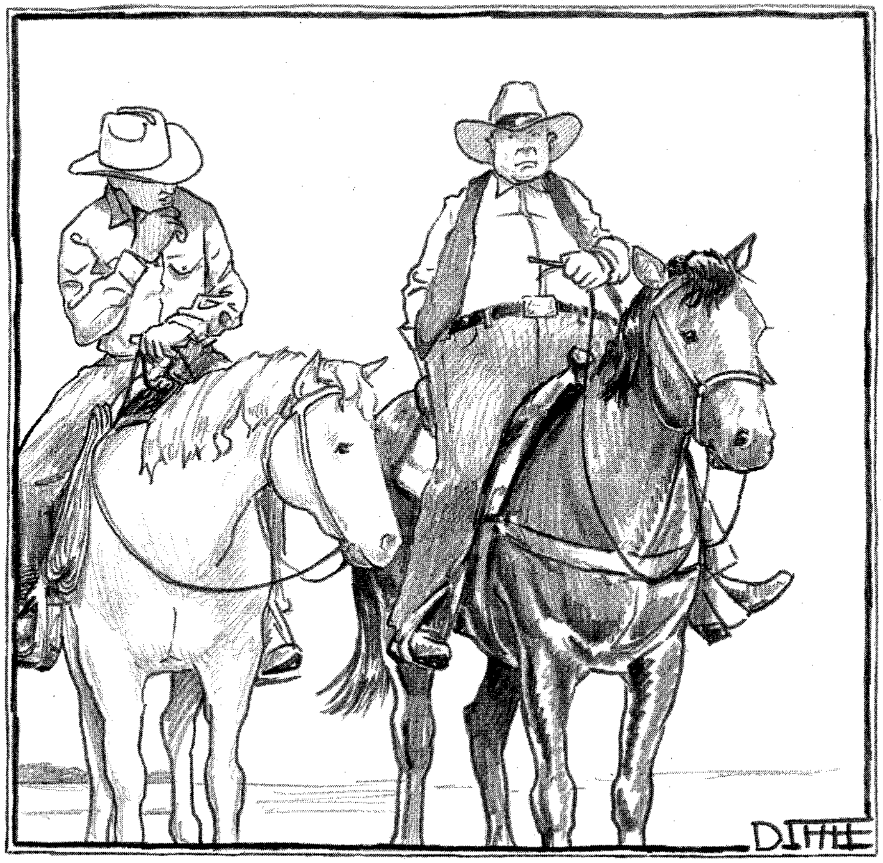
"Surprise me, Herb," Terri said. "Surprise me beyond all thought and reason."

"Maybe I will," Herb said. "Maybe so. I'm constantly surprised with things myself. Everything in my life surprises me." He stared at her for a minute. Then he began talking.

"I was on call that night. It was in May or June. Terri and I had just sat down to dinner, when the hospital called. There'd been an accident out on the interstate. A drunk kid, a teen-ager, had plowed his dad's pickup into a camper with this old couple in it. They were up in their mid-seventies. The kid, he was eighteen or nineteen, he was D.O.A. when they brought him in. He'd taken the steering wheel through his sternum and must have died instantly. But the old couple, they were still alive, but just barely. They had multiple fractures and contusions, lacerations, the works, and they each had themselves a concussion. They were in a bad way, believe me. And, of course, their age was against them. She was even a little worse off than he was. She had a ruptured spleen and along with everything else, both kneecaps were broken. But they'd been wearing their seat belts and, God knows, that's the only thing that saved them."

"Folks, this is an advertisement for the National Safety Council," Terri said. "This is your spokesman, Dr. Herb McGinnis, talking. Listen up now," Terri said and laughed, then lowered her voice. "Herb, you're just too much sometimes. I love you, honey."

We all laughed. Herb laughed, too. "Honey, I love you. But you know that, don't you?" He leaned across the table, Terri met him halfway, and they kissed. "Terri's right, everybody," Herb said as he settled himself again. "Buckle up for safety. Listen to what Dr. Herb is telling you. But, seriously, they were in bum shape, those old people. By the time I got down there, the intern and nurses were already at work on them. The kid was dead, as I said. He was off in a corner, laid out on a gurney. Someone had already notified the next of kin, and the funeral-home people were on the way. I took one look at the old couple and told the E.R. nurse to get me a neurologist and an orthopedic man down there right away. I'll try and make a long story short. The other fellows showed up, and we took the old couple up to the operating room and worked on them most of the night. They must have had incredible reserves, those old people, you see that once in a while. We did everything that could be done, and toward morning we were giving them a fifty-fifty chance, maybe less than that, maybe thirty-seventy for the wife. Anna Gates was her name, and she was quite a woman. But they were still alive the next morning, and we moved them into the I.C.U. where we could monitor every breath and keep a twenty-four-hour watch on them. They were in intensive care for



"You reckon it might be time to start thinking about a new nickname, Slim?"

nearly two weeks, she a little longer, before their condition improved enough so we could transfer them out and down the hall to their own rooms."

Herb stopped talking. "Here," he said, "let's drink this gin. Let's drink it up. Then we're going to dinner, right? Terri and I know a place. It's a new place. That's where we'll go, this new place we know about. We'll go when we finish this gin."

"It's called the Library," Terri said. "You haven't eaten there yet, have you?" she said, and Laura and I shook our heads. "It's some place. They say it's part of a new chain, but it's not like a chain, if you know what I mean. They actually have bookshelves in there with real books on them. You can browse around after dinner and take a book out and bring it back the next time you come to eat. You won't believe the food. And Herb's reading 'Ivanhoe'! He took it out when we were there last week. He just signed a card. Like in a real library."

"I like 'Ivanhoe,'" Herb said. "'Ivanhoe''s great. If I had it to do over again, I'd study literature. Right now I'm having an identity crisis. Right, Terri?" Herb said. He laughed. He twirled the ice in his glass. "I've been having an identity crisis for years. Terri knows. Terri can tell you. But let me say this. If I could come back again in a different life, a different time and all, you know what? I'd like to come back as a knight. You were pretty safe wearing all that armor. It was all right being a knight until gunpowder and muskets and .22 pistols came along."

"Herb would like to ride a white horse and carry a lance," Terri said, and laughed.

"Carry a woman's garter with you everywhere," Laura said.

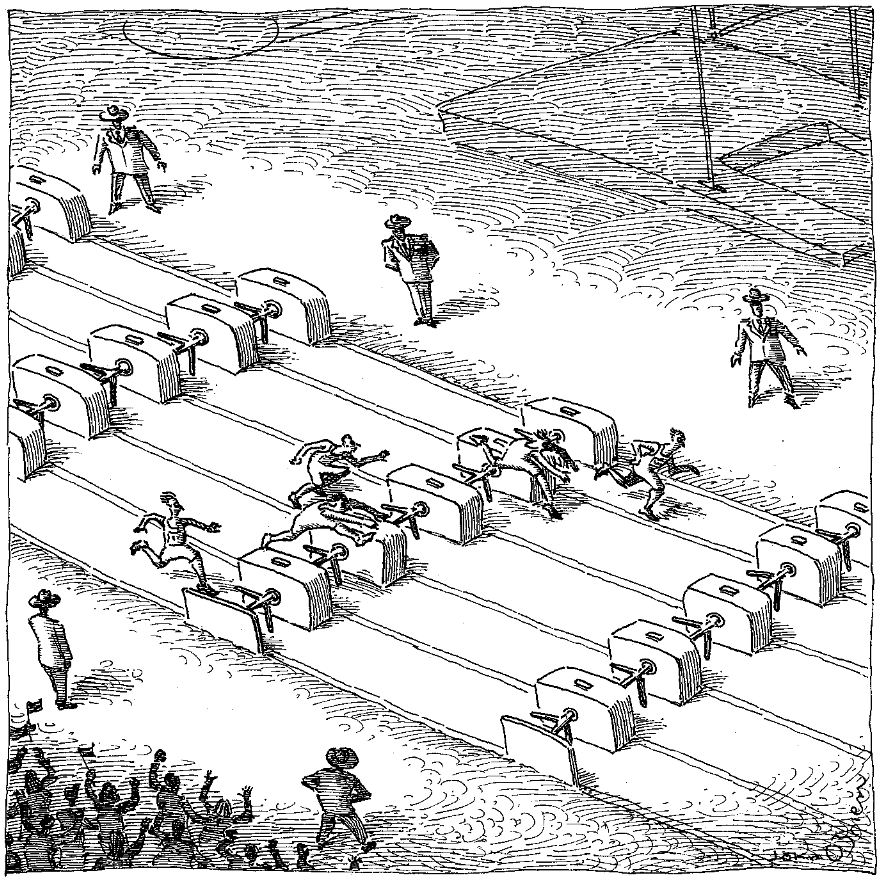
"Or just a woman," I said.

"That's right," Herb said. "There you go. You know what's what, don't you, Nick?" he said. "Also, you'd carry around their perfumed hankies with you wherever you rode. Did they have perfumed hankies in those days? It doesn't matter. Some little forget-me-not. A token, that's what I'm trying to say. You needed some token to carry around with you in those days. Anyway, whatever, it was better in those days being a knight than a serf," Herb said.

"It's always better," Laura said.

"The serfs didn't have it so good in those days," Terri said.

"The serfs have never had it good," Herb said. "But I guess even the knights were vessels to someone. Isn't that the way it worked in those days? But, then, everyone is always a vessel to someone else. Isn't that right? Terri? But what I liked about knights, besides their ladies, was that they had that suit of armor, you know, and they couldn't get hurt very easy. No cars in those days, man. No drunk teen-agers to run over you."



"Vassals," I said.

"What?" Herb said.

"Vassals," I said. "They were called *vassals*, Doc, not *vessels*."

"Vassals," Herb said. "Vassals, vessels, ventricles, vas deferens. Well, you knew what I meant anyway. You're all better educated in these matters than I am," Herb said. "I'm not educated. I learned my stuff. I'm a heart surgeon, sure, but really I'm just a mechanic. I just go in and fix things that go wrong with the body. I'm just a mechanic."

"Modesty somehow doesn't become you, Herb," Laura said, and Herb grinned at her.

"He's just a humble doctor, folks," I said. "But sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Herb. They'd even have heart attacks if it got too hot and they were too tired and worn out. I read somewhere that they'd fall off their horses and not be able to get up because they were too tired to stand with all that armor on them. They got trampled by their own horses sometimes."

"That's terrible," Herb said. "That's a terrible image, Nicky. I guess they'd just lay there then and wait until someone, the enemy, came along and made a shish kebab out of them."

"Some other vassal," Terri said.

"That's right, some other vassal," Herb said. "There you have it. Some other vassal would come along and spear his fellow-knight in the name of love. Or whatever it was they fought over in those days. Same things we fight over these days, I guess," Herb said.

"Politics," Laura said. "Nothing's changed." The color was still in Laura's cheeks. Her eyes were bright. She brought her glass to her lips.

Herb poured himself another drink. He looked at the label closely, as if studying the little figures of the Beefeater guards. Then he slowly put the bottle down on the table and reached for the tonic water.

"I'm global—and I'm warm."

• •

"What about this old couple, Herb?" Laura said. "You didn't finish that story you started." Laura was having a hard time lighting her cigarette. Her matches kept going out. The light inside the room was different now, changing, getting weaker. The leaves outside the window were still shimmering, and I stared at the fuzzy pattern they made on the pane and the Formica counter under it. There was no sound except for Laura striking her matches.

"What about that old couple?" I said after a minute. "The last we heard they were just getting out of intensive care."

"Older but wiser," Terri said.

Herb stared at her.

"Herb, don't give me that kind of look," Terri said. "Go on with your story. I was only kidding. Then what happened? We all want to know."

"Terri, sometimes," Herb said.

"Please, Herb," she said. "Honey, don't always be so serious. Please go on with the story. I was joking, for God's sake. Can't you take a joke?"

"This is nothing to joke about," Herb said. He held his glass and gazed steadily at her.

"What happened then, Herb?" Laura said. "We really want to know."

Herb fixed his eyes on Laura. Then he broke off and grinned. "Laura, if I didn't have Terri and love her so much, and Nick wasn't my friend, I'd fall in love with you. I'd carry you off."

"Herb, you shit," Terri said. "Tell your story. If I weren't in love with you, I damn sure well wouldn't be here in the first place, you can bet on it. Honey, what do you say? Finish your story. Then we'll go to the Library. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Herb said. "Where was I? Where am I? That's a better question. Maybe I should ask that." He waited a minute, and then began to talk.

"When they were finally out of the woods, we were able to move them out of intensive care, after we could see they were going to make it. I dropped in to see each of them every day, sometimes twice a day if I was up doing other calls anyway. They were both in casts and bandages, head to foot. You know, you've seen it in the movies even if you haven't seen the real thing. But they were bandaged head to foot, man, and I mean head to foot. That's just the way they looked, just like those phony actors in the movies after some big disaster. But this was the real thing. Their heads were bandaged—they just had eye holes and a place for their mouths and noses. Anna Gates had to have her legs elevated, too. She was worse off than he was, I told you that. Both of them were on intravenous and glucose for a time. Well, Henry Gates was very depressed for the longest while. Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through and recover, he was still very depressed. Not just about the accident itself, though of course that had gotten to him, as those things will. There you are one minute, you know, everything just dandy, then *blam*, you're staring into the abyss. You come back. It's like a miracle. But it's left its mark on you. It does that. One day, I was sitting in a chair beside his bed and he described to me, talking slowly, talking through his mouth hole so sometimes I had to get up to his face to hear him, telling me what it looked like to him, what it felt like, when that kid's car crossed the center line onto his side of the road and kept coming. He said he knew it was all up for them, that was the last look of anything he'd have on this earth. This was it. But he said nothing flew into his mind, his life didn't pass before his eyes, nothing like that. He said he just felt sorry to not be able to see any more of his Anna, because they'd had this fine life together. That was his only regret. He looked straight ahead, just gripped the wheel and watched the kid's car coming at them. And there was nothing he could do except say, 'Anna! Hold on, Anna!'"

"It gives me the shivers," Laura said. "Brrr," she said, shaking her head.

Herb nodded. He went on talking, caught up in it now. "I'd sit awhile every day beside the bed. He'd lay there in his bandages staring out the window at the foot of his bed. The window was too high for him to see anything except the tops of trees. That's all he saw for hours at a stretch. He couldn't turn his head without assistance, and he was only allowed to do that twice a day. Each morning for a few minutes and every evening, he was allowed to turn his head. But during our visits he had to look at the window when he talked. I'd talk a little, ask a few questions, but mostly I'd listen. He was very depressed. What was most depressing to him, after he was assured his wife was going to be all right, that she was recovering to everyone's satisfaction, what was most depressing was the fact they couldn't be physically together. That he couldn't see her and be with her every day. He told me they'd married in 1927, and since that time they'd only been apart from each other for any time on two occasions. Even when their children were born, they were born there on the ranch and Henry and the missus still saw each other every day and talked and were together around the place. But he said they'd only been away from each other for any real time on two occasions—once when her mother died, in 1940, and Anna had to take a train to St. Louis to settle matters there. And again in 1952, when her sister died in Los Angeles, and she had to go down there to claim the body. I should tell you they had a little ranch seventy-five miles or so outside of Bend, Oregon, and that's where they'd lived most of their lives. They'd sold the ranch and moved into the city of Bend just a few years ago. When this accident happened, they were on their way down from Denver, where they'd gone to see his sister. They were going on to visit a son and some of their grandchildren in El Paso. But in all of their married life they'd only been apart from each other for any length of time on just those two occasions. Imagine that. But, Jesus, he was lonely for her. I'm telling you he *pined* for her. I never knew what that word meant before, *pined*, until I saw it happening to this man. He missed her something fierce. He just longed for her company, that old man did. Of course, he felt better, he'd brighten, when I'd give him my daily report on Anna's progress—that she was mending, that she was going to be fine, just a question of a little more time. He was out of his casts and bandages now, but he was still extremely lonely. I told him that just as soon as he was able, maybe in a week, I'd put him into a wheelchair and take him visiting, take him down the corridor to see his wife. Meanwhile, I called on him and we'd talk. He told me a little about their lives out there on the ranch in the late nineteen-twenties and during the early thirties." He looked around the table at us and shook his head at what he was going to say, or just maybe at the impossibility of all this. "He told me that in the winter it would do nothing but snow, and for maybe months at a time they couldn't leave the ranch, the road would be closed. Besides, he had to feed cattle every day through those winter months. They would just be there together, the two of them, him and his wife. The kids hadn't come along yet. They'd come along later. But, month in, month out, they'd be there together, the two of them, the same routine, the same everything, never anyone else to talk to or to visit with during those winter months. But they had each other. That's all and everything they had, each other. 'What would you do for entertainment?' I asked him. I was serious. I wanted to know. I didn't see how people could live like that. I don't think anyone can live like that these days. You think so? It seems impossible to me. You know what he said? Do you want to know what he answered? He lay there and considered the question. He took some time. Then he said, 'We'd go to the dances every night.' 'What?' I said. 'Pardon me, Henry,' I said, and leaned closer, thinking I hadn't heard right. 'We'd go to the dances every night,' he said again. I wondered what he meant. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I waited for him to go on. He thought back to that time again, and in a little while he said, 'We had a Victrola and some records, Doctor. We'd play the Victrola every night and listen to the records and dance there in the living room. We'd do that every night. Sometimes it'd be snowing outside and the temperature down below zero. The temperature really drops on you up there in January or February. But we'd listen to the records and dance in our stocking feet in the living room until we'd gone through all the records. And then I'd build up the fire and turn out the lights, all but one, and we'd go to bed. Some nights it'd be snowing, and it'd be so still outside you could hear the snow falling. It's true, Doc,' he said, 'you can do that. Sometimes you can hear the snow falling. If you're quiet and your mind is clear and you're at peace with yourself and all things, you can lay in the dark and hear it snow. You try it sometimes,' he said. 'You get snow down here once in a while, don't you? You try it sometimes. Anyway, we'd go to the dances every night. And then we'd go to bed under a lot of quilts and sleep warm until morning. When you woke up you could see your breath,' he said.

"When he'd recovered enough to be

THE ONION POEM

Why are there onions the size of swallows in your maple tree?
In the land of cactus wind the one-eyed dwell.

Where is the village whose name holds back the sea?
Caterpillars are for home demolitions in a globe of tents.

Autumn or spring, which is your plumage of choice?
Every empire is a return of the dead.

And Whitman, what would have become of him had you lost the war?
A rooster in rigor-mortis pose makes vultures descend.

Is that the easiest pain?
The Hittites veiled their nuclear weapon for as long as they could.

But lilies have rights, iris amendments?
And the bats for rabies are for the urban sunset.

Are you a tiger or a martyr to deforestation?
The genetic map is over the counter.

And the Black Sea is black.
And the Red Sea red.

And the leaves like waves on the pebble shore?
I rake them. My father's garden can use some ash.

—*Fady Joudah*

moved in a wheelchair, his bandages were long gone by then, a nurse and I wheeled him down the corridor to where his wife was. He'd shaved that morning and put on some lotion. He was in his bathrobe and hospital gown, he was still recovering, you know, but he held himself erect in the wheelchair. Still, he was nervous as a cat, you could see that. As we came closer to her room, his color rose and he got this look of anticipation to his face, a look I can't begin to describe. I pushed his chair, and the nurse walked along beside me. She knew something about the situation, she'd picked up things. Nurses, you know, they've seen everything, and not much gets to them after a while, but this one was strung a little tight herself that morning. The door was open and I wheeled Henry right into the room. Mrs. Gates, Anna, she was still immobilized, but she could move her head and her left arm. She had her eyes closed, but they snapped open when we entered the room. She was still in bandages, but only from the pelvic area down. I pushed Henry up to the left side of her bed and said, 'You have some company, Anna. Company, dear.' But I couldn't say any more than that. She gave a little smile and her face lit up. Out came her hand from under the sheet. It was bluish and bruised-looking. Henry took the hand in his hands. He held it and kissed it. Then he said, 'Hello, Anna. How's my babe? Remember me?' Tears started down her cheeks. She nodded. 'I've missed you,' he said. She kept nodding. The nurse and I got the hell out of there. She began blubbering once we were outside the room, and she's a tough lot, that nurse. It was an experience, I'm telling you. But after that he was wheeled down there every morning and every afternoon. We arranged it so they could have lunch and dinner together in her room. In between times, they'd just sit and hold hands and talk. They had no end of things to talk about."

"You didn't tell me this before, Herb," Terri said. "You just said a little about it when it first happened. You didn't tell me any of this, damn you. Now you're telling me this to make me cry. Herb, this story better not have an unhappy ending. It doesn't, does it? You're not setting us up, are you? If you are, I don't want to hear another word. You don't have to go any farther with it, you can stop right there. Herb?"

"What happened to them, Herb?" Laura said. "Finish the story, for God's sake. Is there more? But I'm like Terri, I don't want anything to happen to them. That's really something."

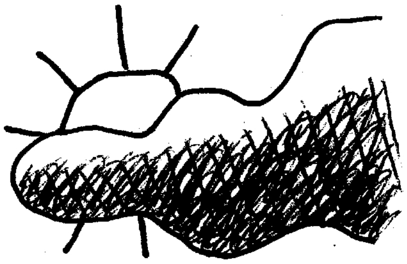
"Are they all right now?" I asked. I was involved in the story, too, but I was getting drunk. It was hard to keep things in focus. The light seemed to be draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from in the first place. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table or to turn on an electric light.

"Sure, they're all right," Herb said. "They were discharged a while later. Just a few weeks ago, in fact. After a time, Henry was able to get around on crutches and then he went to a cane and then he was just all over the place. But his spirits were up now, his spirits were fine, he just improved every day once he got to see his missus again. When she was able to be moved, their son from El Paso and his wife drove up in a station wagon and took them back down there with them. She still had some convalescing to do, but she was coming along real fine. I just had a card from Henry a few days ago. I guess that's one of the reasons they're on my mind right now. That, and what we were saying about love earlier.

"Listen," Herb went on. "Let's finish this gin. There's about enough left here for one drink all around. Then let's go eat. Let's go to the Library. What do you say? I don't know, the whole thing was really something to see. It just unfolded day after day. Some of those talks I had with him . . . I won't forget those times. But talking about it now has got me depressed. Jesus, but I feel depressed all of a sudden."

"Don't feel depressed, Herb," Terri said. "Herb, why don't you take a pill, honey?" She turned to Laura and me and said, "Herb takes these mood-elevator pills sometimes. It's no secret, is it, Herb?"

Herb shook his head. "I've taken everything there is to take, at one time or another. No secret."



"My first wife took them, too," I said.

"Did they help her?" Laura said.

"No, she still went around depressed. She cried a lot."

"Some people are born depressed, I think," Terri said. "Some people are born unhappy. And unlucky, too. I've known people who were just plain unlucky in everything. Other people—not you, honey, I'm not talking about you, of course—other people just set out to make themselves unhappy and they stay unhappy." She was rubbing at something on the table with her finger. Then she stopped rubbing.

"I think I want to call my kids before we go eat," Herb said. "Is that all right with everybody? I won't be long. I'll take a quick shower to freshen up, then I'll call my kids. Then let's go eat."

"You might have to talk to Marjorie, Herb, if she answers the phone. That's Herb's ex-wife. You guys, you've heard us on the subject of Marjorie. You don't want to talk to her this afternoon, Herb. It'll make you feel even worse."

"No, I don't want to talk to Marjorie," Herb said. "But I want to talk to my kids. I miss them real bad, honey. I miss Steve. I was awake last night remembering things from when he was little. I want to talk to him. I want to talk to Kathy, too. I miss them, so I'll have to take the chance their mother will answer the phone. That bitch of a woman."

"There isn't a day goes by that Herb doesn't say he wishes she'd get married again, or else die. For one thing," Terri said, "she's bankrupting us. Another is that she has custody of both kids. We get to have the kids down here just for a month during the summer. Herb says it's just to spite him that she won't get married again. She has a boyfriend who lives with them, too, and Herb is supporting him as well."

"She's allergic to bees," Herb said. "If I'm not praying she'll get married again, I'm praying she'll go out in the country and get herself stung to death by a swarm of bees."

"Herb, that's awful," Laura said, and laughed until her eyes welled.

"Awful funny," Terri said. We all laughed. We laughed and laughed.

"*Bzzzzzz*," Herb said, turning his

"Here they come—act infantile."

• •

fingers into bees and buzzing them at Terri's throat and necklace. Then he let his hands drop and leaned back, suddenly serious again.

"She's a rotten bitch. It's true," Herb said. "She's vicious. Sometimes when I get drunk, like I am now, I think I'd like to go up there dressed like a beekeeper—you know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big thick gloves, and the padded coat. I'd like to just knock on the door and release a hive of bees in the house. First I'd make sure the kids were out of the house, of course." With some difficulty, he crossed one leg over the other. Then he put both feet on the floor and leaned forward, elbows on the table, chin cupped in his hands. "Maybe I won't call the kids right now after all. Maybe you're right, Terri. Maybe it isn't such a hot idea. Maybe I'll just take a quick shower and change my shirt, and then we'll go eat. How does that sound, everybody?"

"Sounds fine to me," I said. "Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on into the sunset."

"What does that mean, honey?" Laura said, turning a look on me.

"It just means what I said, honey, nothing else. I mean I could just keep going and going. That's all I meant. It's that sunset maybe." The window had a reddish tint to it now as the sun went down.

"I could eat something myself," Laura said. "I just realized I'm hungry. What is there to snack on?"

"I'll put out some cheese and crackers," Terri said, but she just sat there.

Herb finished his drink. Then he got slowly up from the table and said, "Excuse me. I'll go shower." He left the kitchen and walked slowly down the hall to the bathroom. He shut the door behind him.

"I'm worried about Herb," Terri said. She shook her head. "Sometimes I worry more than other times, but lately I'm really worried." She stared at her glass. She didn't make any move for cheese and crackers. I decided to get up and look in the refrigerator. When Laura says she's hungry, I know she needs to eat. "Help yourself to whatever you can find, Nick. Bring out anything that looks good. Cheese in there, and a salami stick, I think. Crackers in that cupboard over the stove. I forgot. We'll have a snack. I'm not hungry myself, but you guys must be starving. I don't have an appetite anymore. What was I saying?" She closed her eyes and opened them. "I don't think we've told you this, maybe we have, I can't remember, but Herb was very suicidal after his first marriage broke up and his wife moved to Denver with the kids. He went to a psychiatrist for a long while, for months. Sometimes he says he thinks he should still be going." She picked up the empty bottle and turned it upside down over her glass. I was cutting some salami on the counter as carefully as I could. "Dead soldier," Terri said. Then she said, "Lately, he's been talking about suicide again. Especially when he's been drinking. Sometimes I think he's too vulnerable. He doesn't have any defenses. He doesn't have defenses against anything. Well," she said, "gin's gone. Time to cut and run. Time to cut our losses, as my daddy used to say. Time to eat, I guess, though I don't have any appetite. But you guys must be starving. I'm glad to see you eating something. That'll keep you until we get to the restaurant. We can get drinks at the restaurant if we want them. Wait'll you see this place, it's something else. You can take books out of there along with your doggie bag. I guess I should get ready, too. I'll just wash my face and put on some lipstick. I'm going just like I am. If they don't like it, tough. I just want to say this, and that's all. But I don't want it to sound negative. I hope and pray that you guys still love each other five, even three years from now the way you do today. Even four years from now, say. That's the moment of truth, four years. That's all I have to say on the subject." She hugged her thin arms and began running her hands up and down them. She closed her eyes.

I stood up from the table and went behind Laura's chair. I leaned over her and crossed my arms under her breasts and held her. I brought my face down beside hers. Laura pressed my arms. She pressed harder and wouldn't let go.

Terri opened her eyes. She watched us. Then she picked up her glass. "Here's to you guys," she said. "Here's to all of us." She drained the glass, and the ice clicked against her teeth. "Carl, too," she said, and put her glass back on the table. "Poor Carl. Herb thought he was a schmuck, but Herb was genuinely afraid of him. Carl wasn't a schmuck. He loved me, and I loved him. That's all. I still think of him sometimes. It's the truth, and I'm not ashamed to say it. Sometimes I think of him, he'll just pop into my head at any old moment. I'll tell you something, and I hate how soap opera a life can get, so it's not even yours anymore, but this is how it was. I was pregnant by him. It was that first time he tried to kill himself, when he took the rat poison. He didn't know I was pregnant. It gets worse. I decided on an abortion. I didn't tell him about it, either, naturally. I'm not saying anything Herb doesn't know. Herb knows all about it. Final installment. Herb gave me the abortion. Small world, isn't it? But I thought Carl was crazy at the time. I didn't want his baby. Then he goes and kills himself. But after that, after he'd been gone for a while and there was no Carl anymore to talk to and listen to his side of things and help him when he was afraid, I felt real bad about things. I was sorry about his baby, that I hadn't had it. I love Carl, and there's no question of that in my mind. I still love him. But God, I love Herb, too. You can see that, can't you? I don't have to tell you that. Oh, isn't it all too much, all of it?" She put her face in her hands and began to cry. Slowly, she leaned forward and put her head on the table.

Laura put her food down at once. She got up and said, "Terri. Terri, dear," and began rubbing Terri's neck and shoulders. "Terri," she murmured.

I was eating a piece of salami. The room had gotten very dark. I finished chewing what I had in my mouth, swallowed the stuff, and moved over to the window. I looked out into the back yard. I looked past the aspen tree and the two black dogs sleeping in amongst the lawn chairs. I looked past the swimming pool to the little corral with its gate open and the old empty horse barn and beyond. There was a field of wild grass, and then a fence and then another field, and then the interstate connecting Albuquerque with El Paso. Cars moved back and forth on the highway. The sun was going down behind the mountains, and the mountains had gotten dark, shadows everywhere. Yet there was light, too, and it seemed to be softening those things I looked at. The sky was gray near the tops of the mountains, as gray as a dark day in winter. But there was a band of blue sky just above the gray, the blue you see in tropical postcards, the blue of the Mediterranean. The water on the surface of the pool rippled and the same breeze caused the aspen leaves to tremble. One of the dogs raised its head as if on signal, listened a minute with its ears up, and then put its head back down between its paws.

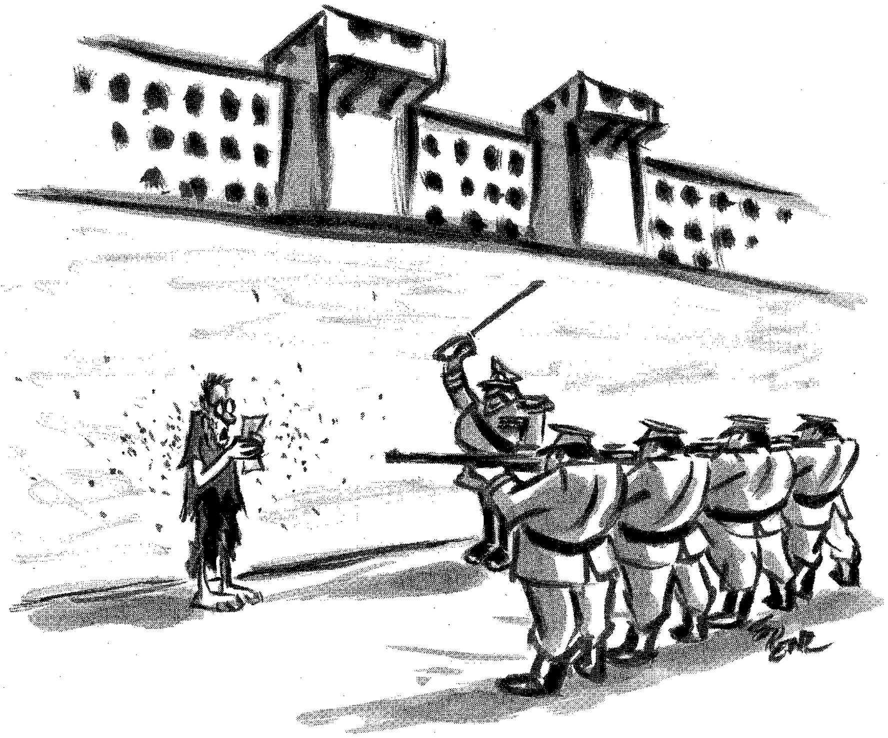
I had the feeling something was going to happen, it was in the slowness of the shadows and the light, and that whatever it was might take me with it. I didn't want that to happen. I watched the wind move in waves across the grass. I could see the grass in the fields bend in the wind and then straighten again. The second field slanted up to the highway, and the wind moved uphill across it, wave after wave. I stood there and waited and watched the grass bend in the wind. I could feel my heart beating. Somewhere toward the back of the house the shower was running. Terri was still crying. Slowly and with an effort, I turned to look at her. She lay with her head on the table, her face turned toward the stove. Her eyes were open, but now and then she would blink away tears. Laura had pulled her chair over, and sat with an arm around Terri's shoulders. She murmured still, her lips against Terri's hair.

"Sure, sure," Terri said. "Tell me about it."

"Terri, sweetheart," Laura said to her tenderly. "It'll be O.K., you'll see. It'll be O.K."

Laura raised her eyes to mine then. Her look was penetrating, and my heart slowed. She gazed into my eyes for what seemed a long time, and then she nodded. That's all she did, the only sign she gave, but it was enough. It was as if she were telling me, Don't worry, we'll get past this, everything is going to be all right with us, you'll see. Easy does it. That's the way I chose to interpret the look anyway, though I could be wrong.

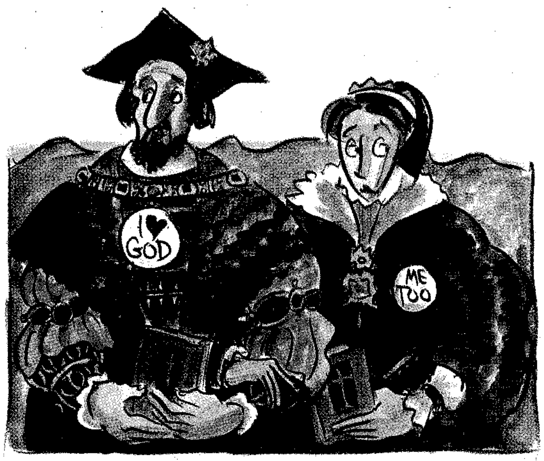
The shower stopped running. In a minute, I heard whistling as Herb opened the bathroom door. I kept looking at the women at the table. Terri was still crying and Laura was stroking her hair. I turned back to the window. The blue layer of sky had given way now and was turning dark like the rest. But stars had appeared. I recognized Venus and, farther off and to the side, not as bright but unmistakably there on the horizon, Mars. The wind had picked up. I looked at what it was doing to the empty fields. I thought unreasonably that it was too bad the McGinnises no longer kept horses. I wanted to imagine horses rushing through those fields in the near-dark, or even just standing quietly with their heads in opposite directions near the fence. I stood at the window and waited. I knew I had to keep still a while longer, keep my eyes out there, outside the house, as long as there was something left to see. ♦



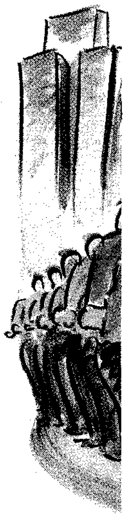
"Although I leave my current position reluctantly, I have no regrets, and look forward to the exciting new challenges ahead."

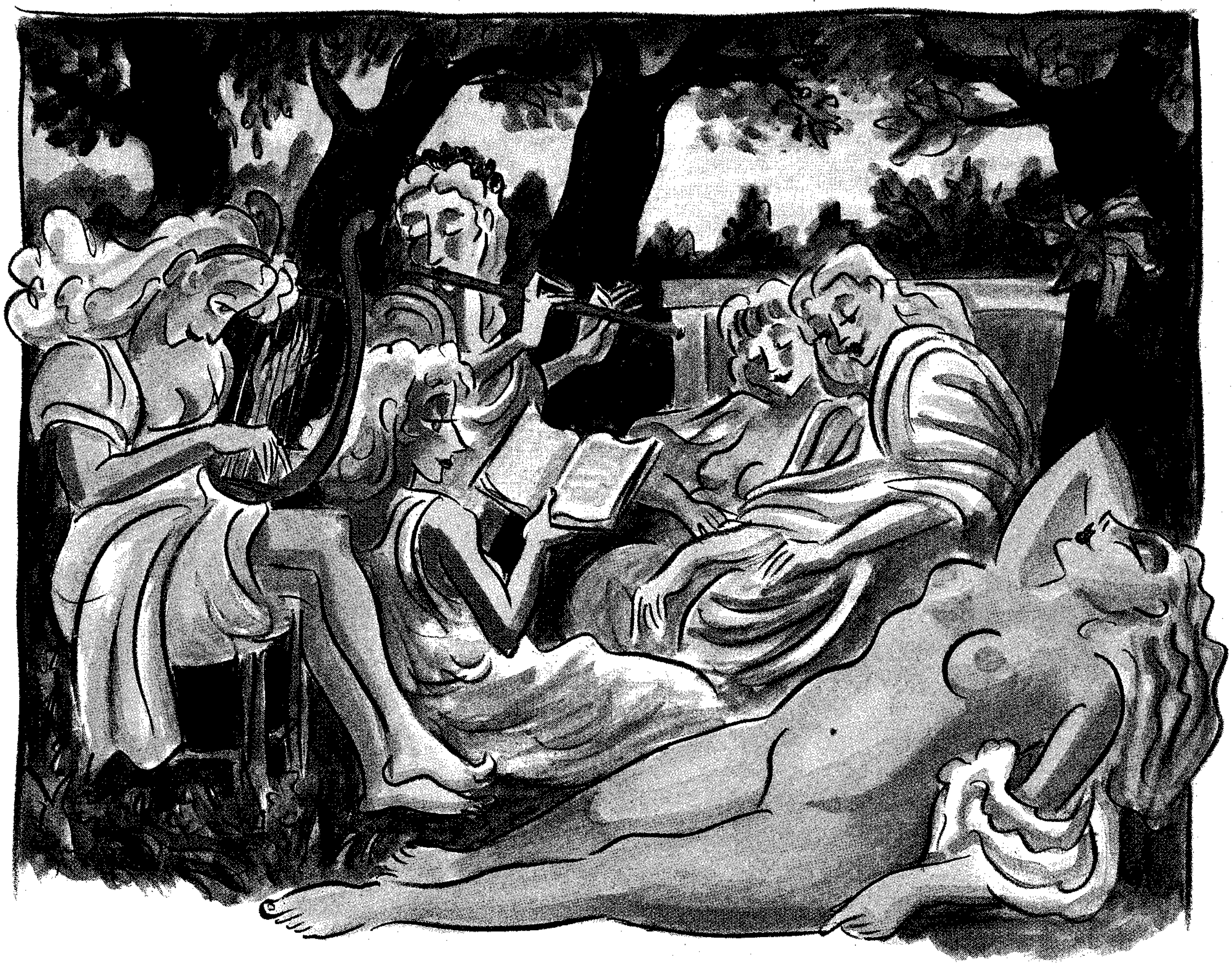
FIVE WRITERS IN SEARCH OF UTOPIA

BY EDWARD SOREL

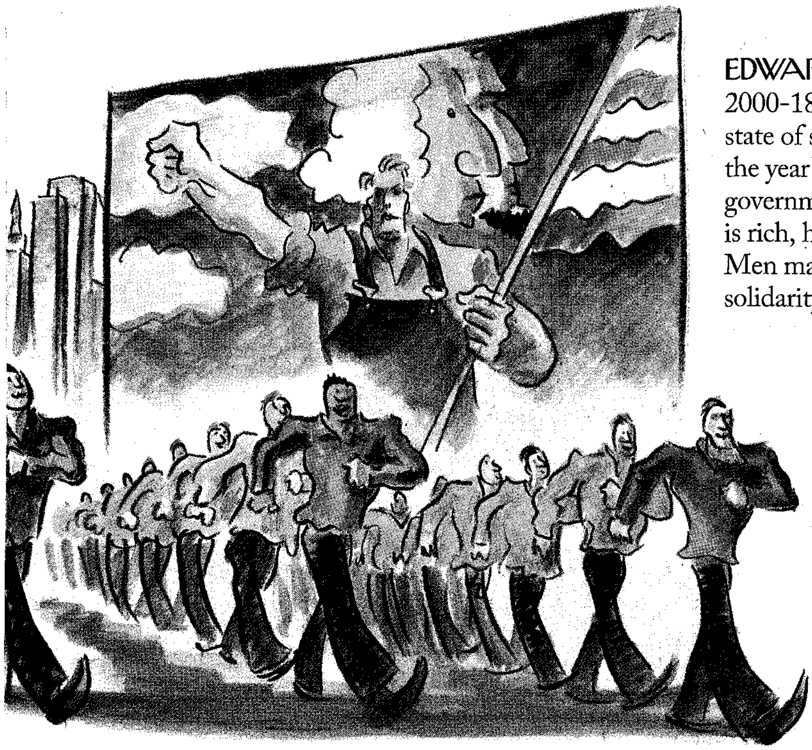


SIR THOMAS MORE invented the word "utopia" to describe the ideal state. In that state everyone was inspired by the divine spirit of God to be good. A single act of adultery was punishable by slavery and, if the adultery continued, death. More's writing career was cut short (as was More himself) when, in 1535, Henry had him beheaded.

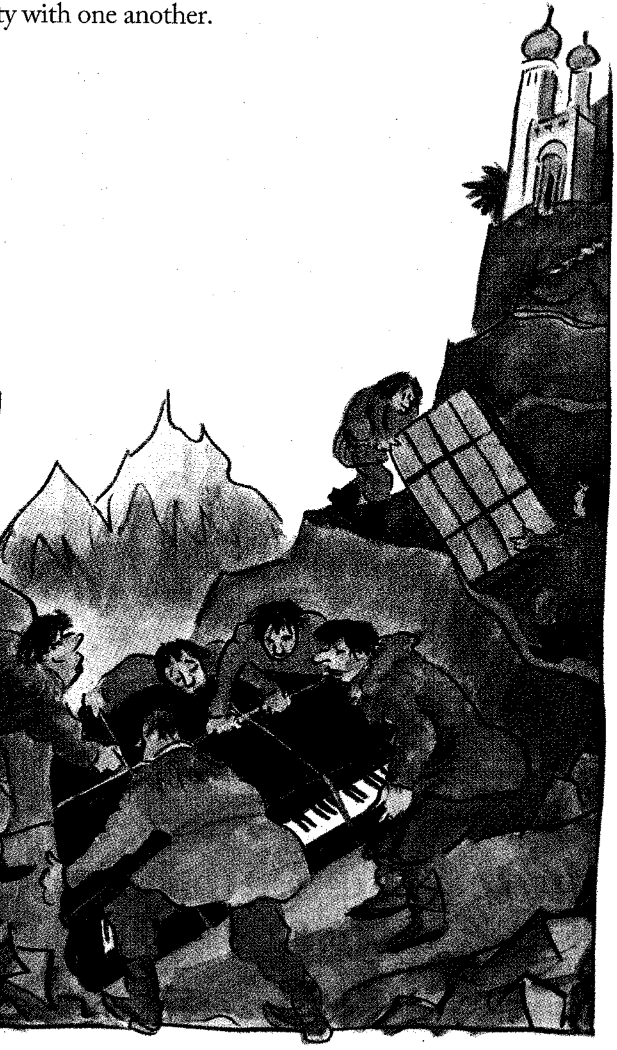




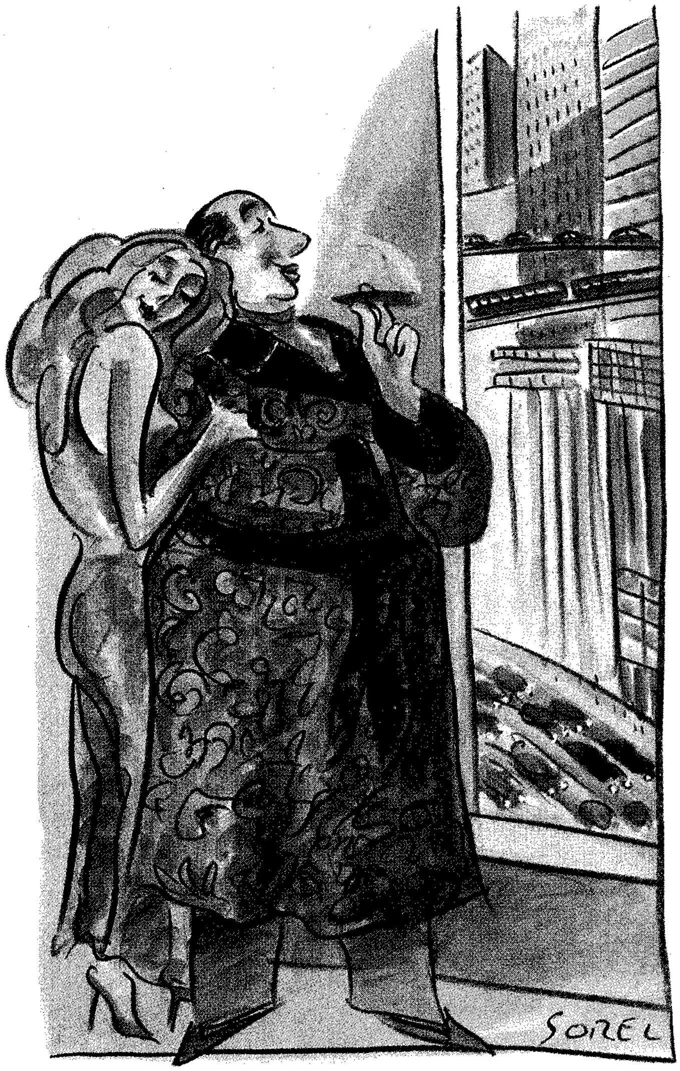
CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, an early feminist, believed that all problems stemmed from crossbreeding: "The moral qualities of hybrids are well known." In her novel "Herland" (1915), a colony of Aryan women give birth, by means of parthenogenesis, to girls only. In this sexually and racially homogeneous society, there are no wars, no aristocracies, and no priests, and everyone is happy, happy, happy.



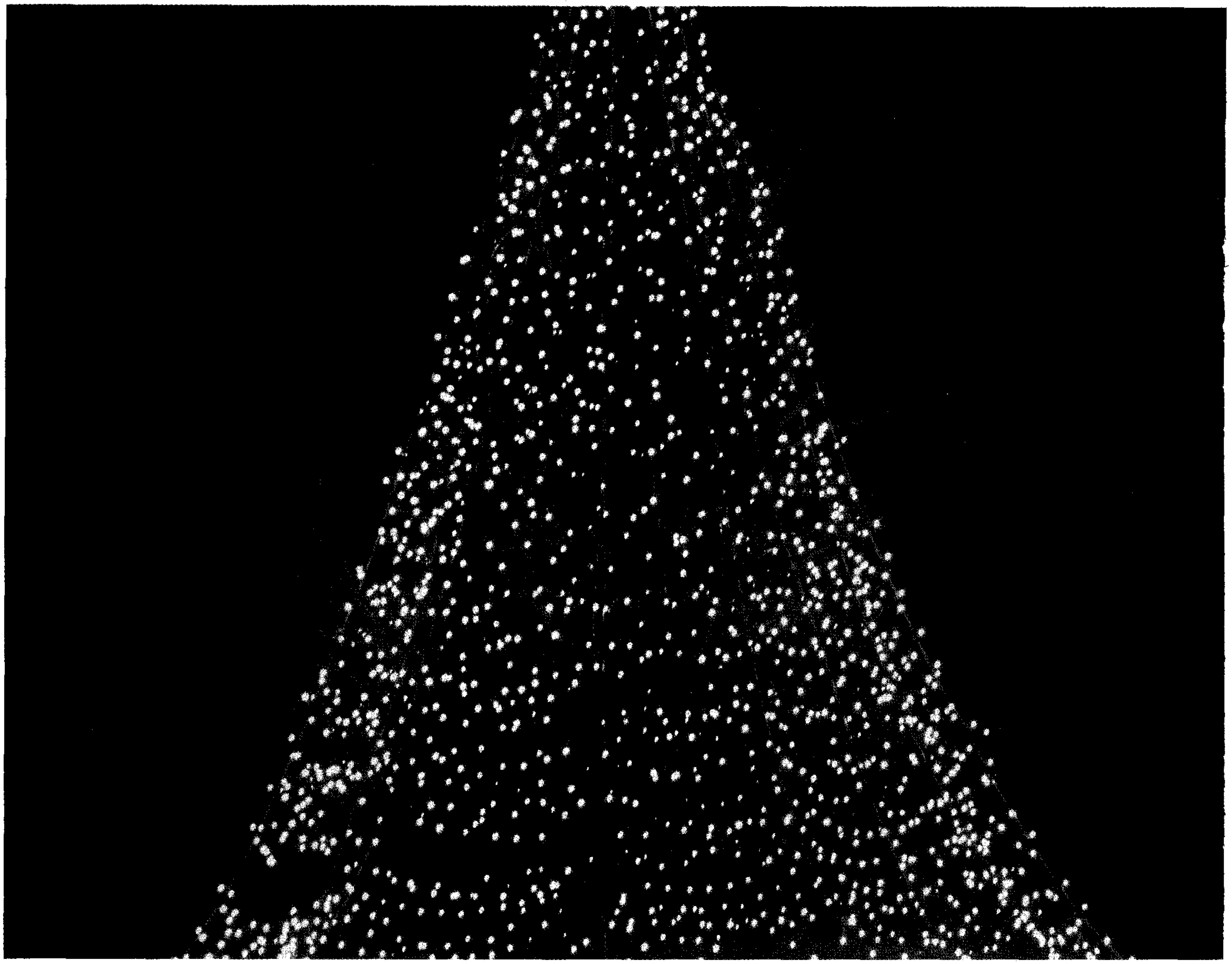
EDWARD BELLAMY'S "Looking Backward: 2000-1887" (1888) imagines a man put into a state of suspended animation and waking in the year 2000. He is surprised to learn that the government owns everything, and that everyone is rich, happy, and able to retire at forty-five. Men march in mass rallies to express their solidarity with one another.



JAMES HILTON wrote "Lost Horizon" in 1933, a good year to find a monastery high in the Himalayas, where there's no war or hunger, and the women smile silently while the men philosophize. It's called Shangri-La, and is run by the High Lama, whose gold mine pays for all the modern amenities. Little is said about the peasants who have to schlep all the stuff up there.



AYN RAND'S "Atlas Shrugged" (1957) is set in a future where the economy is in ruins, because big industrialists have mysteriously vanished. These titans, led by John Galt, plan to destroy the collectivist economy by withholding their know-how. When the economy collapses, Galt gives a victory speech, and the striking industrialists agree to return to power.



MARK GUTHRIE/MILLENNIUM IMAGES, UK; BHARAT SIKKA (2002)

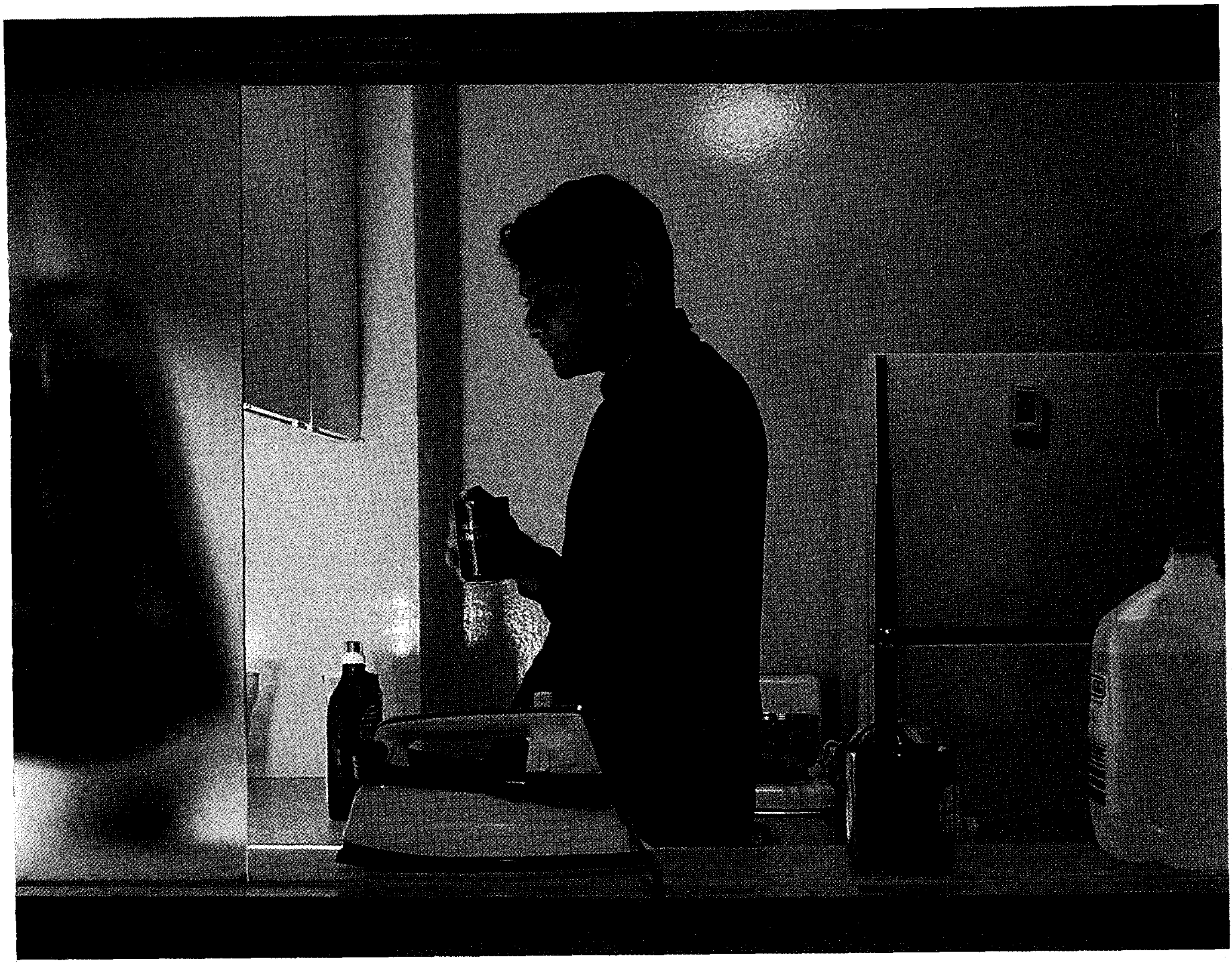
FICTION

YEAR'S END

BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

I did not attend my father's wedding. I did not even know there had been a wedding until my father called early one Sunday during my final year at Swarthmore. I was roused from sleep by a pounding on my door, followed by the voice of one of my hallmates saying my last name. I knew before answering that it was my father; there was no one else who would have called me before nine. My father had always been an early riser, believing that the hours between five and seven were the most profitable part of the day. He would use that time to read the newspaper and then go for a walk, along Marine Drive when we lived in Bombay and on the quiet roads of our town on the North Shore of Massachusetts, where we moved when I was sixteen, after my mother got sick. As much as he used to encourage my mother and me to join him, I knew he preferred being alone. Things were different now, of course; those solitary hours he'd once savored had become a prison for him, a commonplace. I knew that he no longer bothered to go for walks and that since my mother's death he hardly slept at all. I had not spoken to my father in several weeks. He had been in Calcutta, visiting my grandparents, all four of whom were still alive, and when I picked up the phone, left for me hanging upside down by its cord, I expected him to say only that he had returned safely, not that I now had a stepmother and two stepsisters.

"I must tell you something that will upset you," he began, and I wondered if perhaps one of my grandparents had fallen ill, if my mother's parents, in particular, could no longer endure the loss of their only daughter at the age of forty-two. It had been the hardest thing, in those first months after she was gone: having to go to Calcutta with my father



and enter the home where my mother had been a girl, having to see the man and woman who had raised her, who had known her and loved her long before she had a husband and a son. My grandparents had already lived in a state of mild mourning since 1962, when my parents got married and moved away. My father's first job was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which was where I was born, three years later. When I was nine, we went back to India, to Bombay. Occasionally, my mother would return to them, like Persephone in the myth, temporarily filling up and brightening the rooms, scattering her creams and powders on the dressing table, sleeping in the room where she'd been small. After we called my grandparents to tell them my mother was dead, they had held on to the hope that it was only a matter of time, and that she would board a plane and walk through the door once again. When my father and I entered the house, my grandmother asked if my mother was still in the taxi that had already driven away, this in spite of the fact that a photograph of my mother, larger than life and draped with a tuberose garland, hung on their living-room wall. "She's not with us, Didun," I said, and it was only then that both my grandparents broke down, grieving freshly for my mother as neither my father nor I had done. Being with her through her illness day after day had denied us that privilege.

But my grandparents were fine, my father reported now. They missed me and sent their love, he said, and then he told me about Chitra. She had lost her spouse two years ago, not to cancer but to encephalitis. Chitra was a schoolteacher and, at thirty-five, nearly twenty years younger than my father. Her daughters were seven and ten. He offered these details as if responding diligently to questions I was not asking. "I don't ask you to care for her, even to like her," my father said. "You are a grown man, you have no need for her in your life as I do. I only ask, eventually, that you understand my decision." It was clear to me that he had prepared himself for my outrage—harsh words, accusations, the slamming down of the phone. But no turbulent emotion passed through me as he spoke, only a diluted version of the nauseous sensation that had taken hold the day that I learned my mother was dying, a sensation that had dropped anchor in me and never fully left.

"Is she there with you?" I asked. "Would you like me to say something?" I said this more as a challenge than out of politeness, not entirely believing him. Since my mother's death, I frequently doubted things my father said in the course of our telephone conversations: that he had eaten dinner on any given night, for example, and not simply polished off another can of almonds and a few Johnnie Walkers in front of the television. "They arrive in two weeks. You will see them when you come home for Christmas," my father said, adding, "Her English is not so good."

"Worse than my Bengali?"

"Possibly. She will pick it up, of course."

I didn't say what came to my lips—that my mother had learned English as a girl, that she'd had no need to pick it up in America.

"The girls are better at it," my father continued. "They've gone to English-medium schools. I've enrolled them in their grades to start in January."

He had known Chitra just a few weeks, had met her only twice before their marriage. It was a registry wedding, followed by a small dinner at a hotel. "The whole thing was arranged by relatives," he explained, in a way that suggested that he was not to blame. This remark upset me more than anything my father had said so far. My father was not a malleable man, and I knew that no one would have dared to find him a new wife unless he had requested it.

"I was tired, Kaushik," he said. "Tired of coming home to an empty house every night."

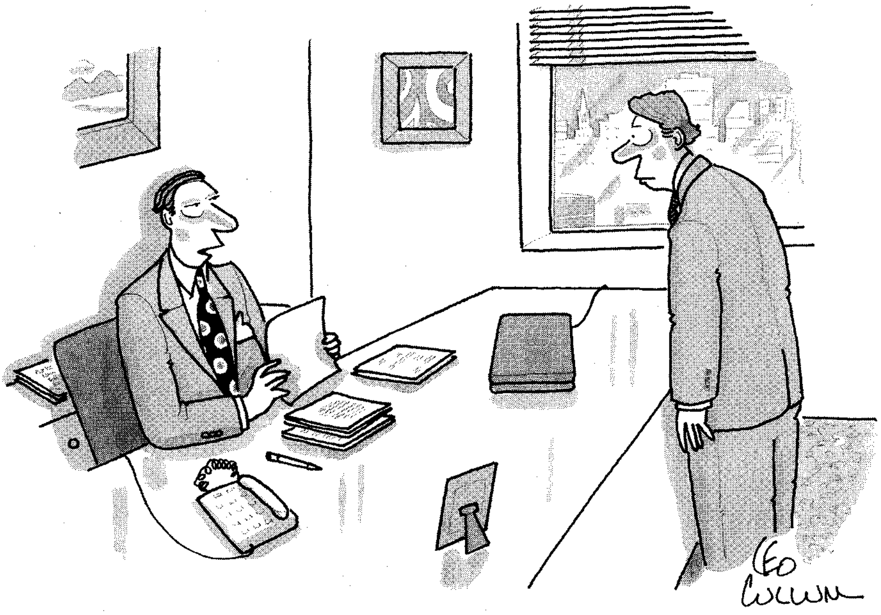
I didn't know which was worse—the idea of my father's remarrying for love or of his actively seeking out a stranger for companionship. My parents had had an arranged marriage, but there was a touch of romance about it, too, my father seeing my mother for the first time at a wedding and being so attracted that he had asked, the following week, for her hand. They had always been affectionate with each other, but it wasn't until her illness that he seemed fully, recklessly, to fall in love with her, so that I was witness to a courtship that ought to have faded before I was born. He doted on her then, arriving home at our Bombay flat with flowers, lingering in bed with her in the mornings, going in late to work, wanting to be alone with her to the point where I, a teen-ager, felt in the way. "I thought," he continued, "since your bedroom is a good size, of putting the girls together there. Would you mind terribly staying in the guest room when you visit, Kaushik? Most of your things are with you now anyway. It is just a matter of where to sleep. But please tell me if you mind." He seemed more concerned about my reaction to a new room than the fact that I had just acquired a new family.

"It's fine."

"You are being honest?"

"I said I don't mind."

I returned to my dorm room. There was a girl in my bed that morning; she had remained asleep as I stumbled barefoot into the hallway to answer the phone. Now she was lying on her stomach, a pen in her hand, finishing a crossword I'd abandoned. Her name was Jessica, and I'd met her in my Spanish class.



"Even though you gave the C.E.O. a kidney, this is a lot of sick days."

"Who was that?" she asked, turning to look at me. Strong sunlight angled in from the window behind her, darkening her to the point that her features were obscured.

"My father," I said, squeezing back into the bed beside her. For a while, she continued pondering the puzzle as I lay there, the unfamiliar smell of her still thrilling. She knew nothing about my family, about my father's recent visit to Calcutta, or about my mother's death, the summer before I started college. In the course of our few weekends together, I had told Jessica none of those things. That morning, after crying briefly against her body, I did.

After my exams, I drove to Massachusetts, dropping off Jessica at her parents' farmhouse in Connecticut on the way. When I decided to attend Swarthmore, my father had given me the Audi he'd bought after we moved back from Bombay. He'd said that it would make it easier for me to come home for weekends and holidays, but I knew it was really an excuse to get rid of yet another thing my mother had touched, known, or otherwise occupied. The day we came back from the hospital for the last time, he took every single photograph of her, in frames and in albums, and put them in a shoebox. "Choose a few. I know pictures are important to you," he told me, and then he sealed the box with tape and put it in a closet somewhere. He had wasted no time giving away her clothes, her handbags, her boxes of cosmetics and colognes. The clothes her Bengali friends in America had no need for were sent to charities in India, as there was nowhere in New England to donate all those saris with their matching blouses and petticoats. This was according to my mother's instructions. "I don't want all that beautiful material turned into curtains," she'd told us from her hospital bed. Her ashes were tossed from a boat off the Gloucester coast, but her gold went back to Calcutta, distributed to poor women who had worked for my extended family as ayahs or cooks or maids.

It didn't matter to me that her things were gone. After Bombay, she had little occasion to wear jewels and saris, saying no to most of the parties she and my father were invited to. Coming home from school toward the end, I would find her sitting wrapped in a blanket, looking out at the pool she no longer had the strength to swim in. Sometimes I would take her outside for fresh air, walking carefully through the birches and pines behind the house and sitting with her on a low stone wall. Occasionally, feeling ambitious, she would ask me to drive her to the sea. "Be sure to keep my ruby choker and the pearl-and-emerald set for the person you will marry," she said during one of those walks. "I'm not planning on getting married anytime soon," I told her, and she said that she wished she could say the same for dying. Ultimately, I disobeyed her. After she was gone, I was unable to open up any of the flat red boxes she'd kept hidden in a suitcase on her closet shelf, never mind set something aside for the sake of my future happiness.

Late in the afternoon, I climbed the road that led to our driveway. Our house was the only source of light for miles, amid isolated patches of hardened snow. It was a stark structure of concrete and glass that my mother had loved more than the shingled, shuttered homes typical of the town. Stone steps had been built into the uneven ground, flanked by overgrown rhododendrons leading to the entrance. I could tell from the other car in the driveway that my father was home, and he stood behind the storm door, waiting for me to come in with my things.

"We were expecting you earlier," he said. "You said you would be here by lunchtime."

I knew then that it was true, that there was another person inside the house, a person who made it possible for my father, without hesitating, to say "we" instead of "I." I said nothing about my detour to Jessica's home and the two hours I'd spent there. Instead, I said the traffic had been bad. I wondered if my father had left work early for my sake. He had given up wearing suits and was dressed as he might be for the weekend, in dark-blue pants and a cream-colored sweater. There was more gray in his hair than I remembered, and though he was still vigorously handsome, old age was creeping into his face, the skin sagging at the sides of his nose, his pale-greenish eyes—a trait that made my mother insist that there was Irish blood on his side of the family—less curious than they had once been. I tried to imagine him, just weeks before, in a silk kurta, a groom's topor on his head. I wondered who had taken photographs of the wedding, whether my father would show them to me.

I was unused to the heavy smell of cooking that was in the air as I stepped into the house. Otherwise things appeared unchanged, the black-and-white photographs I'd taken of the surrounding woods, which my mother had insisted on framing, still lining one wall of the entryway. The house had always maintained an impersonal quality, full of built-in cupboards concealing the traces of our everyday lives. Now that I no longer lived there, I was astonished by how enormous it was, the soaring double-height ceiling of the living room and the great wall of glass looking out onto the trees, more befitting of an institution than a private home. There was a window seat running the length of the glass wall, enough space for twenty people to sit side by side, as they had during my mother's funeral.

My mother had insisted on furnishing the house with pieces true to its modernist architecture: a black leather sectional configured in a U, a chrome floor lamp arcing overhead, a glass-topped kidney-shaped cocktail table, and a dining table made of white fibreglass surrounded by matching chairs. She had never allowed a cloth to cover the table, but one was there now, something with an Indian print that could just as easily have been a bedspread and didn't fully reach either end. In the center, instead of the generous cluster of fresh fruit or flowers my mother would have arranged, there was a stainless-steel plate holding an ordinary saltshaker and two jars of pickles, hot mango and sweet lime, their lids missing, their labels stained, spoons stuck into their oils. A single place had been set for me at one end, with translucent luchis piled on a plate, and several smaller bowls containing dal and vegetables arrayed in a semicircle.

"Sit down," my father said. "You must be hungry." He was nervous, as I was. There was no drink in his hand, no bottle of Johnnie Walker set out, as it usually was by this time, on the cocktail table.

I remained standing, uninterested in the food, staring down at the table. I was no longer accustomed to Indian food. At school, I ate in the cafeteria, and during my time at home after my mother's death my father and I either went out or picked up pizzas, so that the impressive gas stove that my mother had been so excited about when we moved in was used only to boil water for tea. I looked above the table at one corner of the ceiling and saw that it was discolored by a leak.

"When did that happen?" I asked.

"A while back."

"Aren't you going to fix it?" My father, sensitive to how buildings were put together, had always been particular about that sort of thing.

"It's a big project," he said. "There's a reason roofs should be sloped in this part of the world."

I heard no voices or footsteps. It was as if Chitra and her daughters were discreetly hidden in one of the closets, swallowed up as so many other things were. "Where are they?" I asked finally.

She appeared then, walking through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. She was closer to my age than to my father's. I had known this beforehand, but seeing her was a shock. Her hair was long and dark and she had a broad nose on an otherwise pleasant face, though it was too round for me to find beautiful. She was taller than I'd expected her to be, a little taller than my mother. She wore vermillion in her hair, a traditional practice my mother had shunned, that powdery red stain the strongest element of her appearance.

"I would like for you to call me Mamoni," she said in Bengali. Her voice was of a lower pitch than my mother's, with a faint huskiness that was oddly calming. "Do you have any objection to that?" She asked this kindly, smiling, wary of my reaction, and I shook my head, not smiling back.

"Please," she said, this time in English, motioning to the chair.

I turned to my father and asked, "Aren't we all eating?"

"We already have," Chitra said, switching back to Bengali. "You have driven from so far. More is coming." She returned abruptly to the kitchen, and I sat down. The last thing I'd eaten was a slice of fruitcake baked by Jessica's mother. My mouth watered, in spite of my reluctance to eat, and I was suddenly grateful for the food in front of me.

"Start, Kaushik," my father said, sitting down in an empty chair beside me. "It's getting cold."

The arrangement of the bowls, small glass bowls in which we normally had ice cream, felt too formal to me. This was the old-fashioned, ceremonious way I remembered my grandfathers eating in Calcutta, being treated each day like kings after their morning baths. I wondered what was the best way to go about it, whether to take a spoonful of each dish as I went or to dump everything onto the plate at once. In the meantime, I ate the luchis, still warm and impressively puffed. I was reminded of Sunday mornings in Bombay, eating luchis prepared by our Parsi cook, Zareen. I could hear my mother complaining cheerfully in the kitchen, telling Zareen to try another batch, that she was frying them before the oil was hot enough.

When Chitra returned, she was followed by her daughters, two girls who at first glance were indistinguishable, apart from a few inches in height. They were overdressed in our comfortably heated house, in thick sweaters and socks, incongruous Indian things that would soon be rejected, I knew, in favor of clothes from the mall. The sweaters were both made of a sickeningly bright shade of pink wool. The girls were darker and sweeter-looking than Chitra, with heart-shaped faces and two black ponytails on either side of their heads, adorned with red ribbons.

"Would you like some of this?" I asked, pointing to the luchis left on my plate, and to my surprise they stepped forward and both put out a hand, cupping their giggling mouths with the other. One of the girls, the shorter one, was missing a front tooth.

"Let Dada eat in peace," Chitra said. She had trod cautiously in terms of what I was to call her, but now referred to me without hesitation as the girls' older brother.

"You can call me Kaushik," I said to the girls, and this made them giggle more forcefully.

"What about K.D.?" my father suggested.

We all turned to him, puzzled, this man for whom we were now gathered together.

"Short for Kaushik Dada," he explained. I wondered if this was something that had just popped into his head or if he'd considered it carefully beforehand. He had always possessed an inventive streak when it came to words, writing Bengali poems and reading them aloud to my mother. It had been one of our family secrets, the fact that my civil-engineer father was also a poet. I assumed he'd stopped writing after my mother's death, as he'd stopped doing so many things.

SUDDENLY THERE'S POUGHKEEPSIE

what a hard time
the Hudson River has had
trying to get to the sea

it seemed easy enough to
rise out of Tear of
the Cloud and tumble
and run in little skips
and jumps   draining
a swamp here and
there   acquiring
streams and other smaller
rivers with similar
longings for the wide
imagined water

suddenly
there's Poughkeepsie
except for its spelling
an ordinary town but
the great heaving

"That's clever," Chitra said, speaking directly to my father for the first time since my arrival. She spoke approvingly, with the tone of someone who is used to acknowledging small achievements, and it was then that I remembered that she had been a schoolteacher in her former life. "Yes, K.D. is better." I found the nickname inane, but my father seemed proud of it, and it was preferable to Chitra's alternative.

"And what do I call you?" I asked my stepsisters.

"I am Rupa," the taller one said, her voice husky, like her mother's.

"And I am Piu," the one missing the tooth said.

"We are very glad to be in your room," Rupa added. She spoke stiffly, a bit distantly, as if reciting something she'd been forced to memorize. "We are very much appreciating." They spoke to me in English, their accents and their intonation sounding as severe as mine must have when I returned to America at sixteen. I knew the accents would soon diminish and then disappear, as would their unstylish sweaters, their silly hair style.

"Rupa and Piu are eager to see the aquarium and the science museum," my father said. "Perhaps you can take them one day, Kaushik."

I didn't reply to this. "Very tasty," I said instead in Bengali, referring to the food, something my mother had taught me to say when eating in the homes of other people. I got up to carry my plate to the kitchen.

"You have not eaten," Chitra said, intercepting me. She attempted to take the plate from my hand, but I held on to it and went to the kitchen, to pour myself some of the Johnnie Walker my father stored in the cupboard over the dishwasher. "What do you need? I'll get it for you," Chitra said, following me. I was suddenly sickened by her, by the sight of her standing in our kitchen. The space retained my mother's presence more than any other part of the house. The jade and spider plants she

ocean sixty miles away is
determined to reach
that town every day
and twice a day in fact
drowning the Hudson River
in salt and mud
it is the moon's tidal
power over all the waters
of this earth at war with
gravity the Hudson
perseveres moving down
down dignified
slower look it has
become our Lordly Hudson
hardly flowing
                    and we are
now in a poem by the poet
Paul Goodman be quiet heart
home home
                    then the sea

—*Grace Paley*

had watered were still thriving on the windowsill, the orange-and-white sunburst clock she'd so loved the design of, with its quivering second hand, still marking the time on the wall. Ignoring Chitra, I opened one cupboard for a glass and another for the Scotch, but all I found were boxes of cereal and packets of chanachur brought back from Calcutta.

My father came into the kitchen as well. "Where's the Scotch?" I asked him.

He glanced at Chitra, and after some small silent communication between them she walked out. "I put it away," he said once we were alone.

"Why?"

"I've stopped taking it. I sleep better at night, I find."

"Since when?"

"For some time now. Also, I didn't want to alarm Chitra."

"Alarm her?"

"She's a bit old-fashioned." He pulled out the step stool that lived in a space beside the refrigerator and unfolded it. He climbed to the top and opened up a cupboard above the refrigerator, pulling out a half-empty bottle.

I wanted to ask my father what on earth had possessed him to marry an old-fashioned girl half his age. Instead, I said, taking the bottle from his hand, "I hope it's all right if I alarm her."

"Just be quiet about it, especially around the girls."

My parents had never been quiet about their fondness for Johnnie Walker, around me, around anyone. After my mother's death, when I was eighteen, it was I who had filled her shoes, nursing one glass and then another in the evenings in order to keep my father company until we could both justify going to bed. I almost never drank the stuff at college, preferring beer, but whenever I came home I craved the taste.

"I thought tomorrow, while I'm at work, you could go pick up a tree," my father said. "There's a place not too far down 128. Perhaps the girls would want to join you. They're terribly excited about it."

I looked at him, confused. Until now, it had not fully registered that my father would be at work during the days, that I would be alone with Chitra and her daughters.

"You mean a Christmas tree?" For the past three years, since my mother's death, we had not celebrated the holiday at our house. Instead, we had fallen into a pattern of accepting invitations to the homes of friends, appearing in the mornings fully dressed while the other family was still in their pajamas. In Bombay, my mother had always thrown a party on Christmas Day, stringing lights throughout our flat and putting presents under a potted hibiscus. It was a time of year when she always spoke fondly about Cambridge, saying the holiday wasn't the same without the cold weather, the decorated shops, the cards that came in the mail.

"I suppose we'll have to get some presents," my father added. "We still have a few days. It needn't be extravagant."

I knew Chitra and her girls were probably huddled together in the dining area listening to every word my father and I exchanged, but that didn't stop me from saying, "Those girls are barely half my age. Do you expect me to play with them?"

"I don't expect you to do anything," my father replied evenly. He was unshaken by my remark, perhaps even relieved that we were now officially in opposition, that there was no longer a need to pretend. It was as if he had already played out this scene several times in his mind and was weary of it. "I am only asking if you mind picking up a tree."

I had yet to pour my drink. I'd been standing with my back to the kitchen counter, one hand holding a glass, the other the bottle my father had retrieved from its hiding place. I poured it now, taking it as my mother did, with one ice cube, not adding water. I drank what I had poured, then poured another. "Easy," my father said.

I glanced directly at his face. After my mother's death, he had acquired an expression that permanently set his features in a different way. It was an expression less of sadness than of irritated resignation, the way he used to look if a glass slipped from my hands when I was little, or if the day we had planned a picnic happened to be cloudy. That was the expression that had come to his face the morning we stepped into my mother's hospital room for the last time, that subsequently greeted me whenever I came home from college, that still seemed directed at my mother for letting him down. But the expression was missing now. "Not easy," I said, shaking my head at my own reflection suspended against the black backdrop of evening. "It's not easy for me."

My father had already left for work by the time I woke up the next morning. For a while, I remained in bed, not knowing what time it was, confused, initially, as to why I was in the guest room and why I could hear the sound of muffled girlish laughter drifting down through the ceiling. The guest room was on the first floor of the house, in its own wing off a corridor behind the kitchen. My bed faced a sliding glass door that opened onto the back yard and the pool, which was covered now by a black tarp. When we first moved into the house, my mother had devoted a disproportionate amount of attention to setting up the guest room, shopping for the grasshopper-green quilt on the bed and curtains for the glass door, asking me to hang a pink-and-purple Madhubani painting over the chest of drawers. I didn't know who she was expecting to come and stay with us, but by then we indulged her in whatever pastime lifted her spirits. I was grateful for it now, glad not to be upstairs in my old bedroom, which shared a wall with my parents' room. It had been awful enough hearing my mother's raspy breathing at night, her moans. Now I would have had to hear Chitra and my father conversing before bed, I would have had to imagine their bodies under a blanket side by side.

To my knowledge, the only person who'd ever occupied our guest room was a nurse named Mrs. Gharibian, who had come to tend to my mother after her needs became too much for my father and me. Mrs. Gharibian was a middle-aged woman with short brown hair and a soft Southern accent. Normally, she left in the evenings, but for two weeks she spent the nights with us, administering morphine injections and emptying bedpans, making notes in a little cloth book that looked as if it ought to contain recipes. Something about her quietly optimistic manner made me believe that Mrs. Gharibian had the power to sustain my mother—not to cure her but to keep her alive indefinitely. "This is the worst part," she told me once. "You're holding your breath, thinking it's still ahead, but this really is the worst of it, for you and for her." At the time, her words had not soothed me; I could imagine nothing worse than the moment my mother no longer drew air in and out of her lungs, no longer took us in through her weary eyes. I could imagine nothing worse than not being able to look at her face every day, its beauty grossly distorted but never abandoning her. But in the days after my mother's death I realized that Mrs. Gharibian had been right, there had been nothing worse than waiting for it to come, that the void that followed was easier to bear than the solid weight of those days.

I pulled on a sweater, cracked open the sliding door, lit a cigarette. The season's leaves had not been raked and were scattered everywhere, drifting in the breeze over the tarp-covered pool. Our first summer in the house, my mother had used the pool religiously, forty lengths back and forth before breakfast. By the following summer, when she was weak from chemotherapy, she would only wade or dangle her legs on hot days, and at the end of that summer she died.

Inside, I could hear the television—as soon as I emerged from the guest room I would have to see them. I put on my jeans, annoyed that I could not simply walk through the house in my boxers. In the bathroom, I brushed my teeth and took the time to shave. I craved coffee but not food. Dinner had been another embarrassment of riches. Chitra hovered over my father and me and the girls, eating privately after we were done, the way our maids would in Bombay. I imagined another crowded plate waiting for me on the dining table, but there was no breakfast prepared, nothing offered when I approached Chitra and her daughters in the living room. They were sitting with their feet up on the sectional, watching "Family Feud." They were dwarfed by the soaring ceiling, washed out by the morning sunlight. The girls were dressed, but Chitra was wearing a zippered housecoat in a frumpy red-and-yellow calico print. Without makeup or jewelry, she looked even younger. She was drinking a cup of tea, my mother's biscuit tin open beside her.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," Piu and Rupa chimed back, their eyes quickly returning to the television.

"I'll get your tea," Chitra said, putting her cup on the cocktail table and preparing to get up. "I didn't make any for you. Your father told me you like to sleep late when you visit home."

"It's O.K.," I told her. "Don't get up. I don't need any."

She spoke to me in Bengali, I to her in English, as had been the case the night before. I thought that my slack Americanized pronunciation would be lost on her, but she seemed to follow what I said.

She frowned, confused. "No tea in the morning?" The girls also looked away from the television, waiting for my answer.

"I need coffee. It's what I have at school. I'm used to it now."

"But there is no coffee in the kitchen. Not that I have seen."

"Don't worry about it. I'll grab some at Dunkin' Donuts." Before she had the chance to ask, I continued, "It's a place that sells doughnuts. Doughnuts are a kind of cake, with a hole in the center."

"The store is far?"

"Just a few minutes."

"But you must take the car?"

I nodded, and she looked disappointed. "Without a car there is nowhere to go?"

"Not really. Can you drive?"

She shook her head.

"It's not hard. I'm sure you could get a license."

"Oh, no," she said, not as if she were incapable but as if driving were beneath her. "I would not like to learn."

"I'll be back in a while," I said. I noticed that the girls were looking up at me and I hesitated. "Would you like to come along?"

"Yes, please," Rupa and Piu said at the same time. They looked at Chitra, and she nodded in assent.

I went back to the guest room to get my wallet and keys, and when I returned the girls were already in their coats, matching red parkas that my father must have bought for them after they arrived. The thick zippers and bright nylon shells of the coats transformed their appearance, suddenly lending them a legitimately American air. They sat together in the back of my car among the newspapers, empty soda bottles, course books, cassette tapes. "Sorry for the mess," I said, tossing everything off the seat and onto the floor. They fastened their seat belts carefully, prying one of the buckles out of its gap, Rupa helping Piu. Chitra stood in her housecoat looking through the storm door. She was trusting me to take her children to a place she'd never heard of and would not be able to find. Still, she waved and forced a small smile. I stepped on the clutch, about to reverse the car, when Chitra opened the storm door, poking her head out. "And I will be all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I will be safe alone, in this house?"

"Of course," I said, stunned that it would be the first time, nearly laughing at her. "Enjoy it."

"She does not allow us to go outside," Piu said. "Not without her."

"She is afraid because she cannot see neighbors," Rupa added. "And that we will fall into the swimming pool."

I did not know how to respond to any of this, so I said nothing as I backed out of the long driveway and drove toward town. The closest Dunkin' Donuts was less than fifteen minutes away, and when I approached, it felt too soon. I wanted to continue driving, and so I kept going, heading toward the next town, where there was a beach my mother used to like for an occasional change of scenery. This required getting on the highway, and I found it satisfying, accelerating for a short while along the empty, impersonal road. The girls asked no questions about where we were going, each looking steadily out the back windows, the journey brief enough that the lack of conversation did not feel strange. I entered the next town and took a road from which the gray line of the ocean was visible. I pointed this out to Rupa and Piu, but they said nothing. "We can either go into the drive-through or inside," I said once we reached the doughnut shop. "You guys have a preference?"

"Which way is best?" Rupa asked.

"With the drive-through, I get my coffee and drink it as we go back to the house. The other way, we sit inside."

"It was the best of Starbucks. It was the worst of Starbucks."

Rupa voted for the drive-through, Piu to go inside. "Tell you what," I said. "We'll go in, and on our way home I'll get a refill in the drive-through."

They seemed pleased that neither option would be denied to them and got out of the car, holding hands as they walked across the parking lot. The Dunkin' Donuts was part of a shopping plaza, and the lot was crammed with the cars of last-minute Christmas shoppers, but Dunkin' Donuts was empty. I ordered my coffee and asked the girls what they wanted. They stared at the selections, Piu straining on tiptoe, Rupa with her mouth slightly open and her tongue planted in one corner of it. The decent thing to do was to lift Piu up so that she could get a better view, and when I offered she raised her hands and came into my arms. She was heavier than I expected, and I placed her on the counter, where she continued to stare.

"Which is your favorite, K.D.?"

"Boston cream."

"I want that one, then."

"Me, too," Rupa said.

"Make it three," I told the cashier.

We sat in a booth, me on one side of the Formica table, my stepsisters on the other. They began eating enthusiastically, not pausing until they were finished, exchanging glances in a sisterly commentary I was not privy to. I ate my doughnut as well, surprised by how much smaller their mouths were than mine, how much longer it took them to finish. I felt separate from them in every way but at the same time could not deny the things that bound us together. There was my father, of course, but he seemed to be the least relevant, in a way. Like them, I'd made the journey from India to Massachusetts, too old not to experience the shock of it, too young to have a say in the matter. They would recall all of this, perhaps not as clearly as I remembered those first months, but nevertheless they would remember. Like them, I had lost a parent and was now being asked to accept a replacement. I wondered how clearly they remembered their father; Piu would have been only five when he died. Even my memories of my mother had begun to break apart in the three and a half years since her death, the thousands of days I had spent with her reduced to a handful of stock scenes. I was lucky, compared with Rupa and Piu, having had my mother for as long as I did. The knowledge of death seemed present in both sisters—it was something about the way they carried themselves, something that had broken too soon and had not mended, marking them in spite of their lightheartedness.

“Liked that?” I asked.

Both girls nodded, and Piu said, “Another tooth is loose.” She opened her mouth and pressed a tiny chocolate-stained lower tooth forward with her tongue.

The coffee was too hot to drink, so I removed the lid and set it on the counter. Piu was looking out the window, at the cars pulling in and out of the lot. Rupa was eying the doughnuts on display, the dispensers of coffee, the tanks of bubbling red punch.

“Would you like another?”

She shook her head, avoiding my gaze. She was more reserved than Piu and seemed, at times, unimpressed by her new surroundings. “I would like to bring one home for Ma.”

“The one with the colors on top,” Piu said, kneeling up in the booth and pointing. “That is prettiest.”

Rupa disagreed. “I like the one that is covered in snow.”

“Here’s a dollar,” I said, reaching for my wallet. “Would you guys like to buy a couple more?”

“We are not allowed to touch money,” Rupa said.

“It’s only a dollar. Even if you were to lose it between here and there,” I said, glancing back at the cash register, “it wouldn’t be a big deal.”

“Big deal?” Piu asked, knitting her dark brows together.

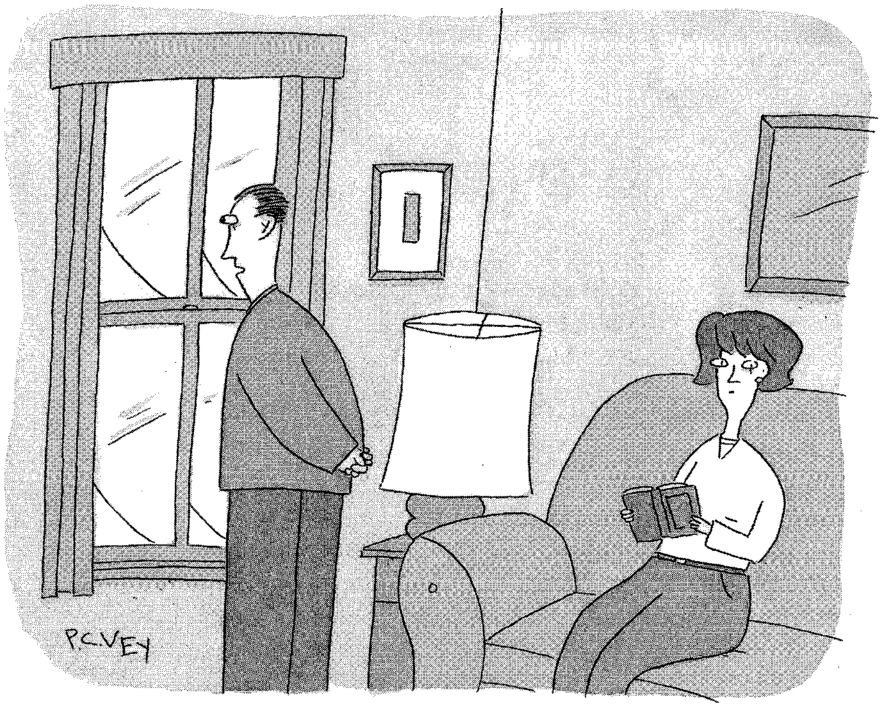
“Not important.”

They slid out of the booth and walked toward the counter, each of them holding a corner of the dollar bill as if it were a miniature banner in a parade. I had my back to the counter, so I turned partway around to watch. I saw Rupa pointing, once and once more, then both of them sliding the dollar to the cashier. He folded over the top of the bag and moved it back and forth, unsure which of the girls to hand it to, eventually leaving it on the counter for Rupa.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked when they returned.

Rupa handed me the change, looking defensive. “We have done something wrong?”

“No. But you could have said the kind of doughnuts you wanted instead of pointing, you could have thanked the cashier when he gave them to you. And you should always start off by saying hello.”



“When all is said and done, I wish I hadn’t built that erotic snowman on the front lawn.”

Rupa looked down at the table. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m just saying, you guys don’t have to be shy. The more you use your English in these situations, the better it will be. It’s already good.”

“Not like yours,” Rupa said. “They will laugh at us in school.”

“I am afraid to go to school,” Piu said, shaking her head and covering her eyes with her hands.

It was not my intention to reassure them, but it seemed cruel not to. “Look, I know how you feel. A few kids might laugh in the beginning, but it doesn’t matter. They laughed at me, too. I came here from Bombay when I was sixteen and had to figure things out all over again. I was born here but it was still hard, leaving and then coming back again.”

“It was before your mother died?” Piu asked. She asked this reverently, a bit sadly, as if she’d actually known my mother, or perhaps because it reminded her of her father, I could not tell. I nodded.

“What was she like?”

“She was—she was my mother,” I said, caught off guard by the question. I felt suddenly vulnerable in front of two little girls I’d known less than a day and yet who understood me better, in many ways, than friends who had known me for years. Four years ago, my mother would have been the one sitting across from me, sipping her tea, complaining how tasteless it was, after one of our windy walks along the beach.

“Do you have a picture of her?” Rupa asked. For a moment her gaze held mine.

“No,” I lied, not wanting to show them the one I carried stuffed behind the I.D. cards in my wallet. It had been taken during a party in our flat in Bombay, long before her illness.

“Why is there no picture of her in the house?” Rupa asked.

“My father didn’t want any.”

“Ma has been looking,” Piu said. “She has looked in every room. But she cannot find one.”

Chitra was sitting on the window seat when we got back, watching for my car. The anxiety in her face was obvious, but she didn’t ask what had taken us so long. Piu and Rupa didn’t give her a chance, rushing up as if they hadn't seen her for days, handing her the doughnuts and telling her what a fun trip it was, how generous I'd been, Piu reporting that they'd paid for the doughnuts themselves. It was obvious that the girls liked me and that, because of her daughters' approval, Chitra was willing to like me, too. But I needed to be alone. The open plan of the house meant it was impossible to watch television or listen to music without engaging with them. Instead, I sat on the bed in the guest room, looking at the yard and leafing through the *Globe*. Then I went for a run, five cold miles on the winding roads. When I returned, they were eating a heavy Bengali lunch, hunched over plates of rice and dal and the previous night's leftovers. I turned down Chitra's invitation to join them and instead, after my shower, dragged the phone into the guest room and called Jessica.

"Why don't you just come here?" she suggested. I wished I could, wished I could simply get into my car and drive to her parents' home. But I wasn't capable of walking out, not yet. When I went to return the phone to its place in the hallway, I realized that they were all upstairs, napping, the way my relatives did in India. For the first time since my arrival, I stretched out on the sectional, to watch television, and without meaning to I fell asleep myself. They were downstairs when I woke up, within arm's reach but behaving as if I were not there. It was already getting dark outside, the arcing lamp spreading its light over the cocktail table. The channel had been changed to a talk show. Chitra was combing and retying the girls' hair and then proceeded to comb her own. She worked through it with her fingers, a stunning mass cascading nearly to her waist which had been contained, until now, in a braid. The sight repulsed me; I could not help thinking of the hair that had fallen out in clumps from my mother's head, the awful wig she'd worn, even in the hospital, up until the day she died.

Rupa sat behind Chitra, massaging her mother's scalp and plucking out a few gray hairs while Chitra leaned back and closed her eyes. I sat up and watched, imagining the rest of Chitra's hair turning gray one day, imagining her growing into an old woman alongside my father, the way my mother was meant to. That thought made me conscious, formally, of my hatred of her. As if aware of what I was thinking, Chitra opened her eyes and looked at me, embarrassed, quickly gathering her hair around her hand. She got up and went to the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with a pot of tea and cups of Ovaltine on a tray. There were two types of chanachur in cereal bowls and, on a small plate, a doughnut cut into four pieces.

"Now will you take tea?" she asked me.

I accepted, lifting from the tray the cup she'd already prepared, with separately heated milk and too much sugar.

"This is from Haldiram," she said, passing me one of the cereal bowls. "Best in all Calcutta."

"No, thank you."

"This room is cold," she continued. "The wind comes straight through the glass. Why aren't there curtains?"

"It would spoil the view," I said.

"The steps are also slippery." She pointed to the floating staircase leading to the second floor. "And there is no railing. I am afraid Rupa and Piu will fall."

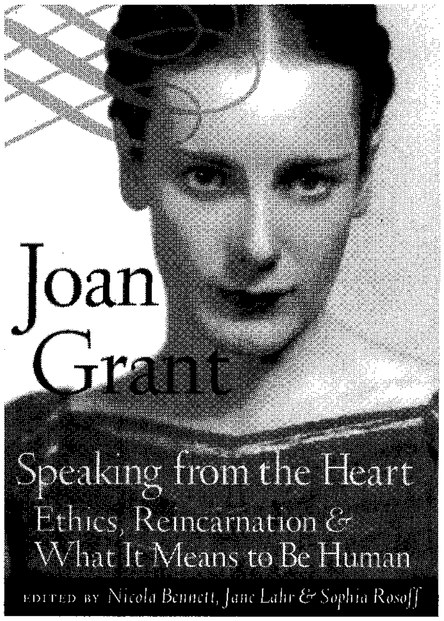
I turned to look at the thick pieces of wood arranged like empty shelves ascending the white walls. Even at her weakest, my mother had gone up and down them without protest.

"Why is there no railing?" Chitra repeated.

"Because we liked it that way," I said, aware that I sounded pedantic. "Because that's what makes it beautiful." We had nothing else to say to each other. We sat and watched one program and then the next as Chitra worked on something with a crochet hook, and I wondered how I was going to survive the next four weeks in her company. We were all waiting for my father, waiting for him to return and explain, if only by his presence, why we were sitting together drinking tea. When he did, he asked me to give him a hand outside; there was a Christmas tree tied to the roof of his car. "I would have gone tomorrow," I said, helping him to untie the rope that held it in place. We dragged the tree inside and propped it in one corner of the living room, next to the high stone fireplace. Chitra and the girls gathered around.

"But it's just like all the other trees outside," Chitra said, pointing through the glass wall.

"It's different, actually." I said. "On



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"Nope. Looks like we're gonna have to use the saw on this one, too."

the property we have pine trees. This is a spruce."

Somewhere in the basement there was a box, my father said, containing the stand, the lights, ornaments to hang from the branches. They were from our first winter in the house, the last Christmas my mother celebrated, and I was surprised my father hadn't tossed them out. He asked me to go down and look for the box. Our basement lacked the sedimented clutter of most, given that we'd lived in the house only a handful of years. There had been no period of haphazard accumulation, only events that had caused things to be taken away. Still, there were a number of boxes stacked up against the walls, empty ones that had once contained the television and the stereo speakers, others still taped up, full of inessential items my parents had had shipped from Bombay and never bothered to unpack.

I slit the tape of a few of the boxes with my car key and lifted the flaps. One contained some old engineering books of my father's. Another had a dinner set wrapped in pages from the *Times of India*, plates I had eaten off for years but forgotten until now, with a pattern of small orange diamonds around the rim. I found my enlarger, tongs, a set of trays, and old bottles of fixer for the darkroom I'd set up during my last year of high school. There were times when my mother had come down and kept me company, sitting quietly in the blackness as I struggled to load film onto the developing reel. Together we would breathe in the chemical smells, their corrosiveness, from which my hands were protected by rubber gloves, nothing compared with what was taking place inside her body. She would keep time for me with her watch, familiarizing herself with the process enough to be able to tell me when to pour the series of fluids in and out of the processing tank, both of us knowing that I'd have to buy a timer, eventually. "It must be something like this," she said once in that perfectly dark, silent, sealed space, and I understood without her saying so that she was imagining what it might be like to be dead. "This is how I want to think of it."

The box I was looking for was labelled "X-Mas" in my mother's hand. I had no sentimental attachment to the items inside, and yet I didn't want to see them. The thought of Chitra going through the box, watching her sift through everything, upset me just as it had upset me, throughout the day, to watch her handle the cutlery, the teakettle, to hold the telephone and speak with my father and learn that he was on his way home. When my father had tried to remove the signs of my mother from the house, I blamed him for being excessive, but now I blamed him for not having done enough. "I can't find it," I said, after returning upstairs. My father did not press the issue. He behaved differently around Chitra, was more accepting of the minor defeats in life. I offered to go to a drugstore and buy what we needed, glad to have another reason to leave the house. When I came back, my father and I trimmed the tree together, Chitra and the girls watching us from the sectional. We placed the tree in the stand and tightened the screws and draped lights over the branches. There was nothing personal or idiosyncratic to put on it, just a box of sapphire-blue balls, so that it looked less like a tree in someone's home than one in the corner of a bank or an office lobby. But Rupa and Piu were delighted, exclaiming that they'd never seen anything more beautiful. My father went upstairs and returned with a shopping bag full of gifts. They'd all been wrapped at whatever store he bought them in, the same green-and-gold paper, professionally taped and tied. He distributed them under the tree, eight boxes altogether. "Two for each of you," he said to no one in particular. Rupa and Piu got up and went to look at them, excited to find their names written on the tags. "Can we open them?" Piu asked Chitra, Chitra who did not know the answer.

"Not until Christmas morning," I said. "Until then you can just look. And maybe shake them a little."

"So lovely," Chitra said, impressed now that the tree had been trimmed.

"Kaushik, what about a picture?" my father suggested.

I shook my head. I had left my camera, my father's old Yashica, at school.

"But you always have the camera with you." That look of irritated disappointment, the one that had appeared the day my mother died and was missing now that he'd married Chitra, passed briefly across my father's face.

"I forgot it," I said. It was true, I did always have the camera with me. Even on quiet weekends when I came home and my father and I saw no one I would bring it, taking it with me on walks. This time I had left it behind, knowing that I would not want to document anything.

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"I don't understand," my father said.

"Neither do I," I replied. "You haven't wanted a picture of anything in years."

"That's not true."

"It is."

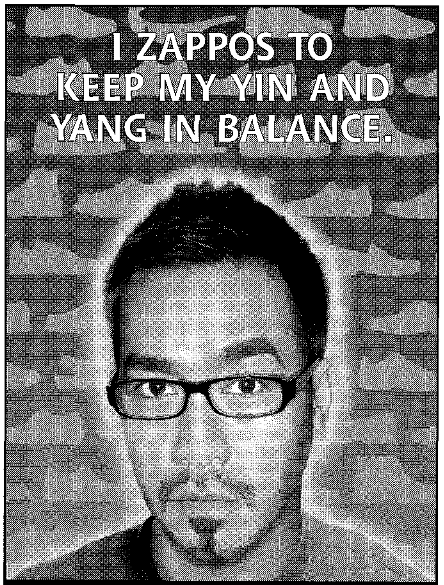
We were stating facts and at the same time arguing, an argument whose depths only he and I could fully comprehend. I went to the kitchen to pour myself a drink, bringing it with me to the dining table when Chitra announced, a few minutes later, that dinner was ready. No one said anything during the meal. When we were done eating, Chitra cleared all the plates and took them into the kitchen, just as she had the night before. I sat finishing my drink, and Rupa and Piu slithered out of their seats and returned to the sectional to watch more television. My father got up and followed them, settling into his recliner with the newspaper. He opened it to a large ad for Lechmere that featured cameras for sale, circling things with a ballpoint pen.

Two days later was Christmas Eve, and my father stayed home from work, suggesting that we all go, the five of us, into Boston to show Chitra and the girls the city. I had no excuse and so I joined them, sitting in the back seat of my father's car, between Rupa and Piu. Though we were going for only a short ride, the trip felt strangely momentous. For the last two years of my mother's life, when she was always in and out of the hospital, we had gone nowhere, taken no trips for pleasure apart from occasional walks along the beach.

I had thought we would get out of the car at various points and walk around, but Chitra said it was too cold and my father agreed. After circling around Kendall Square, he drove over the Mass Avenue Bridge and turned onto Commonwealth Avenue, which was decorated with lights and wreaths, and then drove around the Public Garden and the Common. He pointed out the golden dome of the State House and the beautiful homes that lined the steep streets of Beacon Hill. Behind those homes was Mass General, where my father and I had gone together so many times. A phone call had woken us in the early hours one morning, and we had driven down to Boston just as the first light was intruding with harsh orange streaks in the sky. She looked the same as the night before, lying in the bed with her eyes closed, only all the machines were shut off, making the room in which we had spent so many quiet hours all the more silent. Her skin felt chilled when I touched it, as if she had just returned from a brisk walk in winter. I looked up now at the windows of the hospital, but my father turned toward Chitra. "This is where America's Brahmins live," he said, laughing at his own joke, and in the front seat Chitra smiled in a way that revealed to me that she was falling in love.

For Christmas, my father bought me a sweater and a shirt, but later he gave me an envelope containing ten hundred-dollar bills. "You will need it for this and that," he said when I told him it was too much. My father had also arranged to go to Disney World for five days; this, along with the toys under the tree, was his present to the girls. "You are welcome to join us," my father said when he announced this news on Christmas morning, but I said no, making up something about there being a winter session at Swarthmore. My father did not try to persuade me. But Rupa and Piu were devastated. "Why don't you want to come?" they kept asking, all the more bewildered when they discovered that I had never been to Disney World. I sensed that they needed me, as I needed them, to mask the growing, incontrovertible fact that Chitra and my father now formed a couple. My presence was proof that my mother had once existed, just as they represented the physical legacy of their dead father. "Won't you be lonely by yourself?" Chitra asked me more than once. At the same time, I gathered that she, like my father, was relieved to hear my plans. I had no plans, of course, other than to be in the house alone.

Once I knew that they were leaving, I felt more charitable toward the girls, and in an effort to make up for not going to Disney World I took them to the science museum one day, and another day to the aquarium. They behaved impeccably on these outings, never complaining or demanding, overjoyed when I bought each of them a cheap rubber lobster. They were with me, having ice cream at Herrell's in Harvard Square, where I'd gone to buy a record, when Piu's loose tooth fell out as she crunched on her cone, and I sopped up the blood in her mouth with napkins and put the sticky tooth in my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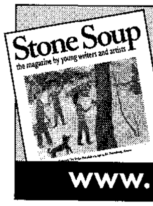

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pocket, telling them about the tooth fairy as we drove home. I did not hold it against them that they had begun calling my father Daddy. They never spoke of their own father, but one night I woke up to the sound of Piu screaming, locked inside a nightmare, asking for her Baba again and again.

A few days before New Year's Eve, my father and Chitra were invited to a holiday party at the home of some of my parents' friends. How strange it was, seeing Chitra carefully descending the floating staircase, dressed up in a dark-green sari and a garnet necklace, and my father behind her, then beside her, always beside her now, his hair neatly combed, wearing a tweed sports jacket I had not seen since my mother died. I was not expected to attend the party, but Rupa and Piu were going, had put on matching dresses with red-and-black checkered skirts and black velvet headbands. At the last minute, just as my father was taking the coats out of a closet, Rupa turned to Chitra and asked, "Can we stay home?"

"Of course not," Chitra said. "It would be rude."

"But K.D. isn't going."

"Actually, it may be rather dull for them," my father said. "I don't believe there will be any children close to their ages."

"I haven't made dinner for them," Chitra said. "They haven't eaten."

"I can get a pizza," I offered, looking up from the sectional. I winked at Rupa and Piu. "We can have our own party." The girls clapped their hands, Piu smiling to reveal the new gap in her teeth. Chitra told me to have them in bed by nine, and then she and my father buttoned their coats and went off to the party. It was the first time they had gone out alone. The girls took off their shoes but kept their tights and party dresses on, and sat with me to watch television. We passed a bag of potato chips back and forth, and when it was empty I called for pizzas. I put on my coat to go to the restaurant. Rupa and Piu stared at me.

"Where are you going?" Piu asked.

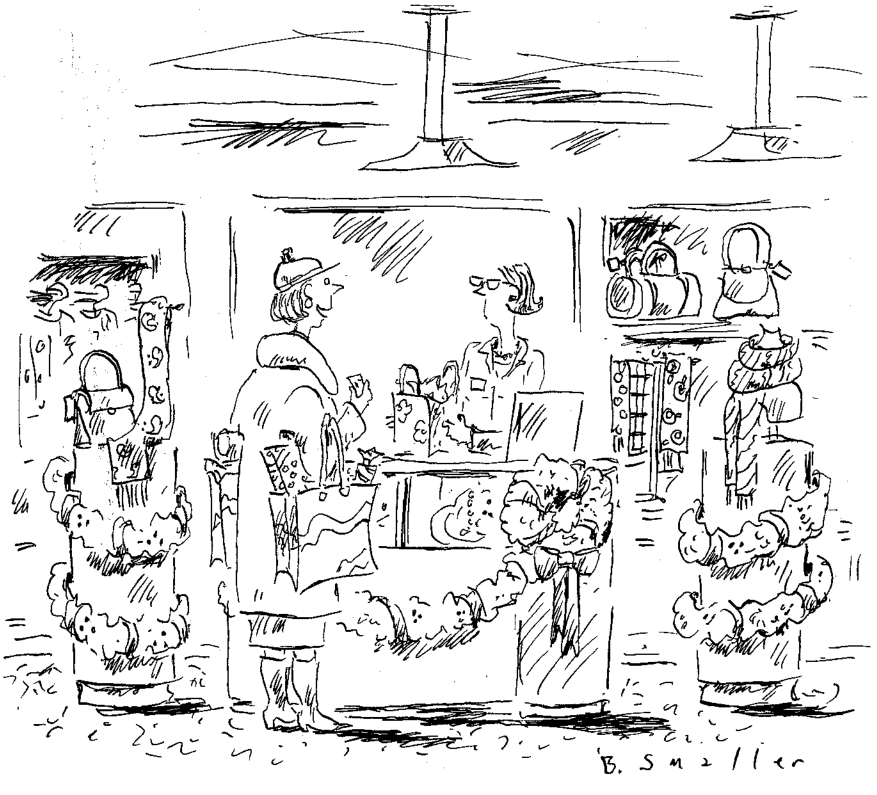
"To get our dinner."

"You are leaving us alone?"

"It's ten minutes away. I'll be back before you know it."

They said nothing, but they looked scared. It annoyed me that Chitra had instilled in them such fear. "Well, come if you want."

We drove to the restaurant and ended up eating the pizza there. I drank a beer and smoked a few cigarettes during the meal, and Rupa and Piu sipped Cokes from tall paper cups. They asked me again if I would go with them to Disney World. I told them I would think about it, and the lie was enough to fill them with new hope. The phone was ringing when we returned to the house. It was Jessica, so I poured myself a drink and took the phone into the guest room. When I told her about my father taking Chitra and the girls to Disney World, Jessica suggested coming up to visit me while they were away. I missed her, I thought about her and desired her at night in bed, and yet I did not want to see her in my parents' house. I didn't say this, but she sensed my reluctance, and we began to quarrel for the first time. It was an awkward conversation, full of long pauses, draining, even though it never escalated into a real argument. I told Jessica the same lie that I told the girls, that I would think about it, and got off the phone.



"I try to keep the Christmas spirit by having credit-card debt all year long."

When I opened the door, I saw that Rupa and Piu were no longer watching television. I called for them, checking the kitchen, the bathroom, then went upstairs, to the door of my old room. I didn't hear them talking and, seeing that it was already ten o'clock, thought maybe they were asleep. I opened the door, looking into the room for the first time since I'd come home. The lights were on, and I saw my old bed, and a folding cot placed beside it without any gap. The things I'd had on the walls, the poster of Jimi Hendrix and a copy of Paul Strand's "Blind Woman" that I'd ripped out of a magazine, had not been removed. The closet door was open, and there was a chair in front of it, as if positioned to pull something down from the shelf. I had thought the room would be transformed with Rupa and Piu's things, but there was no sign of them apart from the extra bed and the small pile of toys they'd got for Christmas neatly stacked in one corner. Close to this pile sat Rupa and Piu in their party dresses. They had their backs to me, were hunched over something on the carpet that I couldn't see. "She looks sad in this one," I heard Piu whisper in Bengali, and then Rupa, saying, "She and K.D. smile the same way."

"What are you doing?" I said.

They leaped apart, startled, realizing I was there. Spread out on the gray carpet, arranged like a game of solitaire, were about a dozen photographs of my mother taken from the box my father had sealed up and hidden after her death. Even from a distance, the banished images assaulted me: My mother wearing a swimsuit by the edge of the pool at our old club in Bombay. My mother sitting with me on her lap on the brown wooden steps of our house in Cambridge. My mother and my father standing, before I was born, in front of a snow-caked hedge.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I said now.

Rupa looked at me, her dark eyes flashing, and Piu began to cry. I walked into the room and picked up the pictures, putting them face down on my old dresser. Then I grabbed Rupa by the shoulders from where she sat crouched on the floor, shaking her forcefully. Her body had gone limp, her thin legs wobbling in their cabled black tights. I wanted to throw her against the wall, but instead I managed to direct her to the folding cot and forced her to sit, knowing that I was squeezing too hard. "Tell me, where did you find these?" I demanded, just inches from her face.

Now Rupa began to cry as well, but she pointed to the closet. I walked toward it, but Piu, still sobbing on the carpet and shaking her head, said, "It is not there anymore." She crawled toward the cot where her sister was sitting and pulled out a black shoebox, white at the edges, the masking tape that had once bound it lifted away. This time it was Piu that I grabbed, dragging her away from the shoebox as if her proximity would contaminate it and thrusting her aside.

"You have no right to be looking at those," I told them. "They don't belong to you, do you understand?"

They nodded, Rupa trembling as if with cold, Piu's lips pressed tightly together. Tears fell down their faces but words continued to pour out of me, words that should not have been uttered, should not have been heard. "Well, you've seen it for yourselves, how beautiful my mother was. How much prettier and more sophisticated than yours. Your mother is nothing in comparison. Just a servant to wash my father's clothes and cook his meals. That's the only reason she's here, the only reason both of you are here."

Now the girls were no longer crying, their shiny black heads staring down at the carpet, not moving, saying nothing in reply. I took the shoebox and the rest of my mother's photographs and left the room. I wanted to remove the pictures from the house, as far as I could. I returned to the guest room, hastily packed my things, and got into my car, telling myself that my father and Chitra would be back from their party soon enough. My actions felt spontaneous, almost involuntary, propelled by the adrenaline of a state of emergency, but I realize now that on some level I had been thinking of running away for days. Rupa and Piu never came out of their room, never opened the door to see or question what I was doing, and when I started the car they did not rush out of the house to beg me to stay.

I had no idea where to go, but I got on the highway and started driving north. I quickly left Massachusetts, driving through a small piece of New Hampshire and over the bridge into Maine. As I approached Portland, I turned onto a smaller, two-lane road that occasionally hugged the sea. I drove down dark, empty stretches punctuated now and then by a cluster of churches and restaurants and houses. I could not see the ocean but detected its salty smell and the jerking sound of the wind, a sound like that of a fire burning, penetrating the closed doors and windows of my car. I thought at first that I would drive through the night, but eventually I began to feel tired and looked for a place to sleep. Most of the hotels and motels were shut for the season, and the ones that looked open were closed because it was so late. I was considering pulling onto the shoulder to nap when I spotted a motel with a twenty-four-hour sign glowing in the parking lot.

The next day, I was woken by the calls of seabirds. I sat up in a sagging brass bed and saw the water for the first time, outside my window. I remember that the window was disproportionately small for the room, as if the motel itself were a ship. The water was choppy, a gray a shade or two darker than the sky, its nearness and activity unknown to me as I'd slept. The room was dank and clammy, wallpapered with small blue anchors against a white ground, and the empty medicine cabinet in the bathroom was edged with rust. The desk clerk told me that there was a restaurant a few miles down the road, and that I was somewhere on Penobscot Bay.

After breakfast, I walked around the

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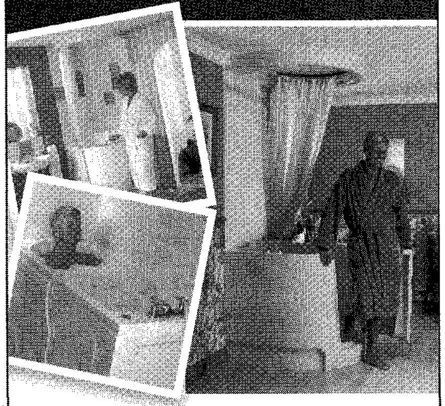

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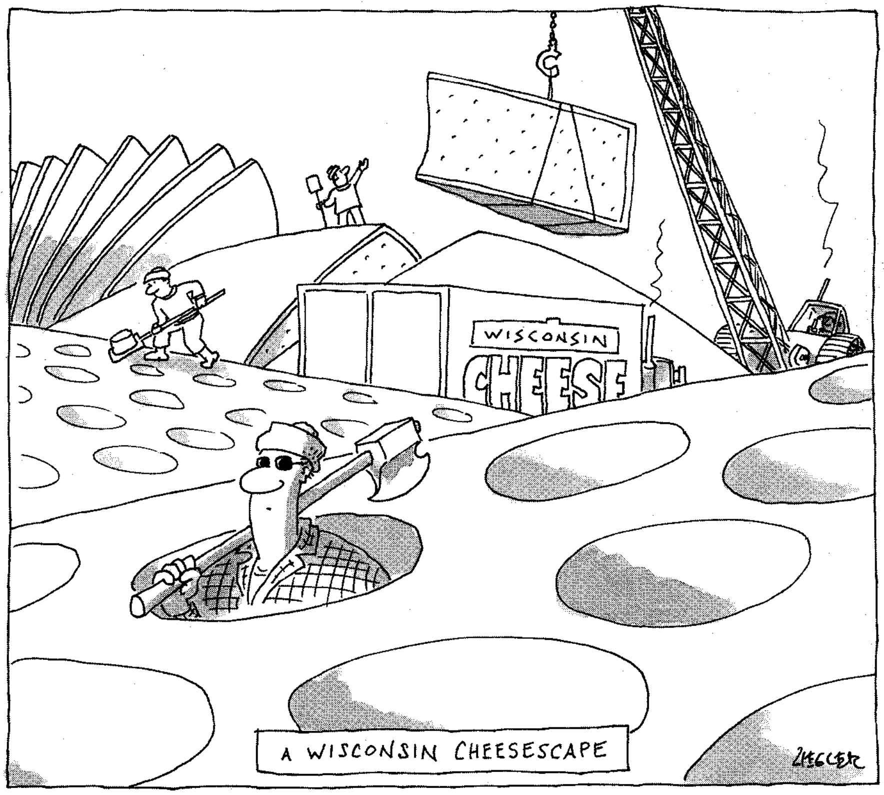

town and along the harbor, past boarded-up businesses and summer homes. But I spent most of the day in the motel, either looking at the ocean from the armchair in my room or downstairs at the bar, drinking, feeling sick to my stomach about what had happened the night before, afraid of myself and ashamed. I kept seeing Rupa and Piu with their heads bent, their bodies prepared to be shaken again, absorbing all the things I was too afraid to say to my father and Chitra. And I thought of them in the house after I'd left, knowing how frightened they were to be alone. I wondered what had happened when my father and Chitra returned from the party, what Rupa and Piu had told them. I assumed they'd told everything, that they had done the dirty work of expressing what I could not. I was aware that by disappearing I was causing my father concern, but I felt worse about my treatment of the girls. It was to Rupa and Piu that I owed the greater apology, but at the same time I knew that what was done was done, that no matter what I said now I would never be able to make it right.

In the afternoon, I went to a pay phone and called my father at work. "I know that you aren't happy, that this is hard for you," he told me, as if my disappearance were something he'd been prepared for. "But you could have done the decent thing and waited until morning. You could have said goodbye." I didn't offer an explanation. I had none. Instead, I asked how the girls had been when my father and Chitra returned. "They were asleep," my father said. "Still, you shouldn't have abandoned them in the house, Kaushik, not so late at night. Anything might have happened. Chitra was quite disturbed. She's worried that it's her fault you've run off, that she's said or done something to upset you. She's trying her best, you know."

I realized then: the girls had said nothing. Chitra had no idea that I had ranted at her daughters, that I had harmed and terrified them.

"We leave for Florida the day after tomorrow," my father said. "Do you plan to return by then?"

"I don't think so."

"You will get back to college on time?"

"Yes."

"We will speak in a few weeks, then."

He hung up the phone. He had not bothered to ask me where I'd gone.

The next morning, I got back in my car, and for days I did the same thing: driving along the coast, eating in restaurants when I was hungry, finding motels when I was tired, paying for it with the money my father had given me for Christmas. I didn't bother getting a map. A gas-station attendant told me that eventually I would hit Canada. Now and again I saw the water, little islands and striped lighthouses and tiny spits of land. It was too brutally cold to get out of the car, but occasionally I did, to look at the ocean or explore a bit of trail. It was like no other place I'd seen, nothing like the North Shore. The sky was different, without color, taut and unforgiving. But the water was the most unforgiving thing, nearly black at times, cold enough, I knew, to kill me, violent enough to break me apart. The waves were immense, battering rocky beaches without sand. The farther I went, the more desolate it became, more than any place I'd been, but for this very reason the landscape drew me, claimed me as nothing had in a long time.

Most of the fishing villages were shut down, the lobster boats out of the water for the winter, the wooden traps stacked and empty. The bars were the only consistent sign of life, strange small places that felt more like people's living rooms, with clamshells for ashtrays and nets draped on the walls. I had nothing to say to the fishermen and the other people who drank there and had lived in those villages all their lives, their tobacco-stained beards concealing their faces, their hands raw and chapped, their accents unfathomable. They were neither friendly nor unfriendly, and I kept to myself, aware that I stood out. I did not crave anyone's company. I had never travelled alone before and I discovered that I liked it. No one in the world knew where I was, no one had the ability to reach me. It was like being dead, my escape allowing me to taste that tremendous power my mother possessed forever.

I spent five days getting to the border of Canada, another four heading back, using my father's money almost to the penny. Somewhere during that time, the year ended; I was aware of it thanks only to a free shot of whiskey I received one night in a bar. I was certain that if my mother had lived to visit that part of the world she would have persuaded my father to buy her one of the hundreds of houses I passed, overlooking the open sea. The bars and diners I stopped at all had stacks of pamphlets listing waterfront properties, and sometimes, lacking anything else to read, I looked at them. It reminded me of my parents' search for our house after leaving Bombay. In spite of all the effort and money my mother put into that house, we had never been able to inhabit it properly, and because of what was happening to her we never felt happy. There phone calls were made to doctors, medicine bottles were strewn about, the paraphernalia of her illness taking over every corner of every room. It was there that my mother prepared to depart for another place altogether, one where we would be unable to join her and from which she would not return.

One day, close to the Canadian border, walking along cliffs overlooking the Bay of Fundy, I found a spot that was particularly striking. A sign told me that I was in the easternmost state park in the country. The trail was not easy, falling through rich-smelling pine forests. The tops of the trees were spindly, their lower boughs dusted with snow. The wind ripped and chewed through everything, and the water was a sheer drop down. I crossed paths with no one. For a long time, I watched the approach and retreat of the waves, their thick caps crashing apart against the rocks, that eternally restless motion having an inversely calming effect on me. The following day I returned to the same spot, this time bringing with me the shoebox of my mother's photographs. I sat on the ground, opened the box, and began going through the pictures one by one, as if they were pieces of mail that I was quickly scanning and would read later on. But there were too many pictures, and after a few I, like my father, could no longer bear the sight of them. A slight lessening in the pressure of my fingertips and the ones I was holding would have blown away into that wild sea, scattering down to where my mother's ashes already resided. But I could not bear that, either, and so I put them back in the box and began to break the hardened ground. I had only a stick and a sharp-edged rock to work with and the hole was not impressive, but it was deep enough to conceal the box. I covered it with dirt and stones. The moon's first light was shining down when I was done, and I walked back, aided by that same beam of light, to my car.

A few weeks before my college graduation, my father called to say that he was selling our house, that he and Chitra and the girls were moving to a more traditional one in a less isolated suburb of Boston. There were other Bengalis nearby and an Indian grocery in the town, things that were more important to Chitra than the proximity of the ocean and modernist architecture had been for my mother. I would not be following my father to that new house; I had made plans to travel in South America after graduating. The events over Christmas had never been discussed, never acknowledged. Along with my father, Chitra and Rupa and Piu watched my commencement sitting on folding chairs on the grass, clapping when it was my turn to walk to the dais, posing beside me for photographs in my cap and gown. The girls were polite to me, respectful of the fact that it was my day, but it was as if we'd never met. I knew that they had never revealed anything to Chitra or to my father about the things I had said and done that night, that it would remain between the three of us, that in their silence they continued both to protect and to punish me. The memory of that night was now the only tie between us, eclipsing everything else. In their utterly polite way, they made that clear. They spoke only to each other, and though their accents had turned American, my stepsisters, the closest thing I would ever have to siblings, seemed more impenetrable to me now than they had when they arrived. "Everyone closer," my father directed from behind his new camera, and Rupa and Piu held their shoulders tensely as I draped an arm around each. "We are both moving forward, Kaushik," my father told me after the ceremony. "New roads to explore." And, without our having to say it, I knew we were both thankful to Chitra for chafing under whatever lingered of my mother's spirit in the place she had last called home and for forcing us to shut its doors. ♦

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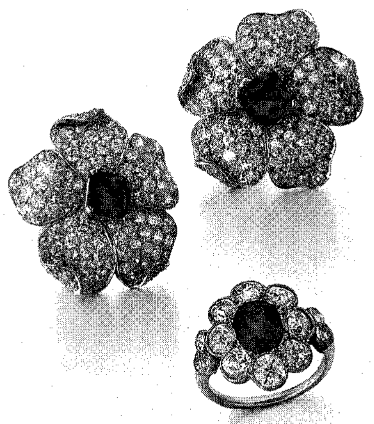

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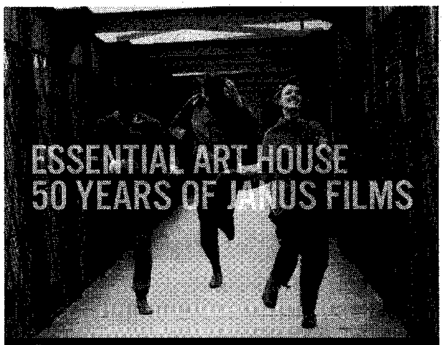

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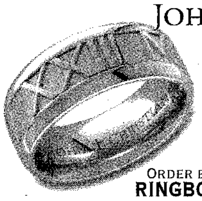

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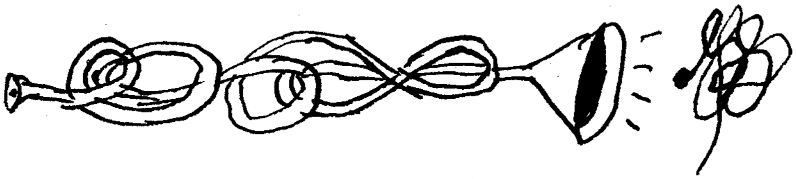


POP MUSIC

STAIRWAY TO HERE

Led Zeppelin returns.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

Last Monday, in London, Led Zeppelin played its first full live set since 1980, at the O_2 Arena—formerly the Millennium Dome—which seats twenty-two thousand and was built in 1999, during the early, optimistic days of Tony Blair's tenure. (The giant spiked dome looks like a satellite that has crashed to earth, been filled with air, and turned into a mall done up with holographic snowflakes and futuristic blue lights.) Twenty million people applied in an on-line lottery for tickets to the concert and crashed the computer system. Before the show, tickets were going for more than a thousand dollars apiece on eBay. After all, this was a reunion that was not supposed to happen. Led Zeppelin broke up in 1980, following the death of its drummer, John Bonham, and since then the remaining members—the singer, Robert Plant, the guitarist, Jimmy Page, and the bassist, John Paul Jones—have made only three public appearances together, none well received. In a recent interview, Plant cited the low quality of these performances, including one at a Live Aid concert in 1985, as an impetus for reuniting to play "one last great show," with Bonham's son, Jason, on drums.

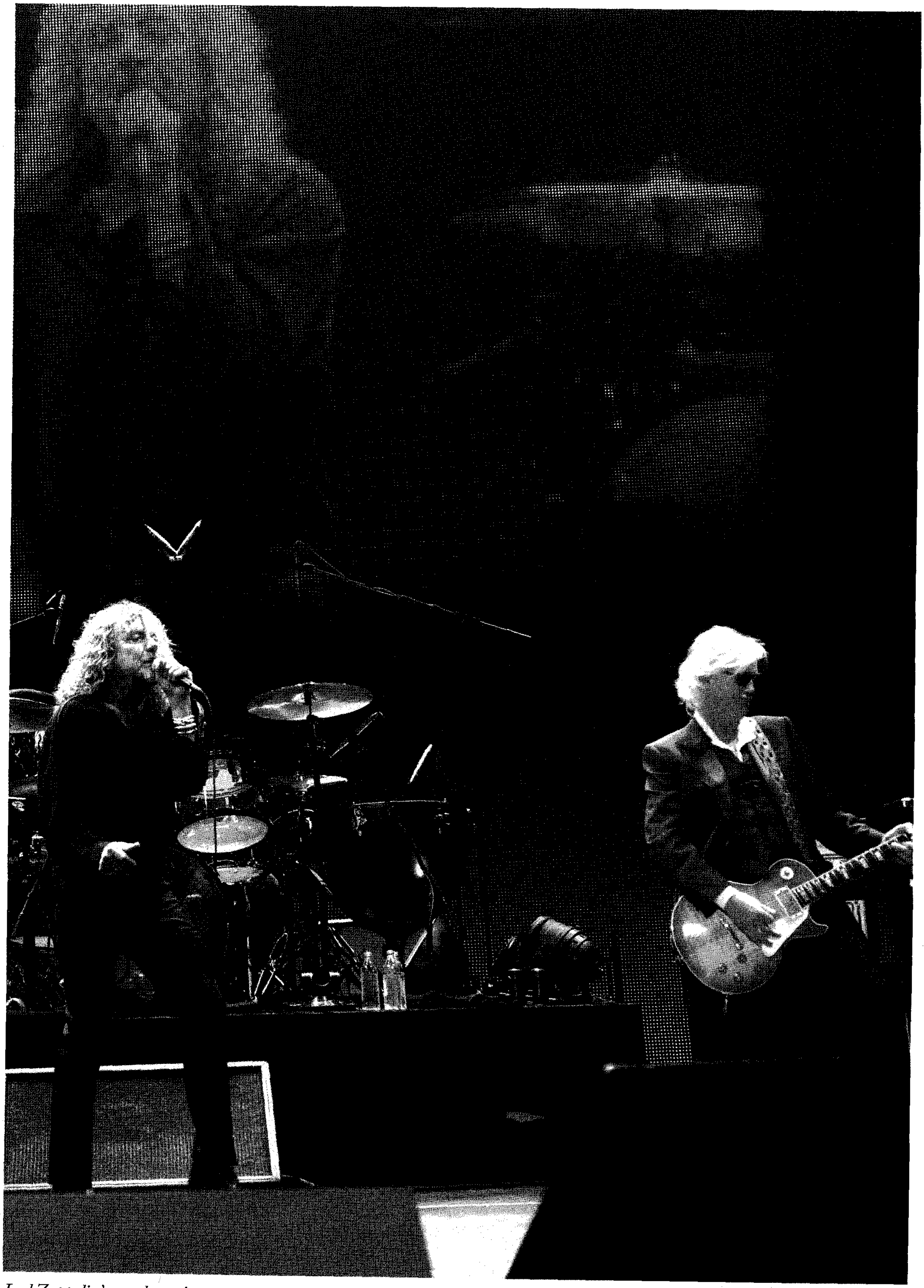
The show was billed as a tribute to Ahmet Ertegun, the co-founder of Atlantic Records, who signed the band in 1968 and died in 2006, and who came as close to being universally beloved as any music executive could be. Ertegun's careful nurturing of acts like Ray Charles and Led Zeppelin is often cited as evidence of the kind of patient temperament now lacking at major labels. As eager to score hits as any other record man, he seemed just as determined to let artists muck about. To the chagrin of other Atlantic executives and record-store employees everywhere, Ertegun allowed Led Zeppelin to release its fourth album, "Led Zeppelin IV" (1971), without any words on the jacket. (The album is the band's biggest seller and the fourth-biggest-selling album of all time.)

My affection for Led Zeppelin is limitless and somewhat irrational. I often say that my respect for the band's music is mathematical: there are fewer bad songs on its eight studio albums than on anyone else's. But such shaky calculations mask what is an involuntary response to the music. John Bonham played the drums as if the fate of the universe depended on how hard he could hit them; he could both dissolve a song and send it rocketing forward. Bonham played rope-a-dope with the clock: sometimes his accents arrive a tiny bit behind the beat; at others, they land a split second ahead. (If you can isolate Bonham's placement of the hi-hat, kick drum, and cowbell on "Good Times, Bad Times"—never mind the tomtom rolls, themselves a prizeworthy achievement—you'll have heard proof that 4/4 time is limiting only if you believe it is.) Page's guitar playing was born during an era of British reverence for the American blues, but it went somewhere else entirely, drawing on acoustic English folk guitarists like Bert Jansch and on a battery of studio effects that made his work irreproducible and strange. Listen to Page's sound on "Custard Pie," a song from the 1975 album "Physical Graffiti" which was stitched together from a handful of famous blues numbers. Page, like many other rock guitarists, uses a Marshall amplifier, but the result is simultaneously nasty, small, and big, as though a tornado were happening inside a tin can. Jones, officially the band's bassist, was equally skilled on the keyboards. The sepulchral electric piano chords that open "No Quarter," from "Houses of the Holy" (1973), could be ambient music, and Jones's electric-piano part on the heavy and freewheeling "Misty Mountain Hop," from "Led Zeppelin IV," makes the song sound like one extended bass line, though it contains no bass.

Plant is the member of the band who is most likely to be mocked. Those tight jeans! That long, unmanly hair! Those open shirts! Those operatic high notes! What a peacock! But his work is unique and unpredictable. His lyrics for Led Zeppelin were oddly eco-friendly—odes to ice, snow, trees, and England's sylvan beauty (several songs were inspired by "The Lord of the Rings")—and, in retrospect, his singing, which often sounded distinctly un-Western, seemed to anticipate the globalization of pop. This may be one reason that so many rock critics at first misunderstood Plant; his keening high notes make him sound more like a muezzin than like a blues singer, and his cackles and screeches don't belong to any particular pop tradition. Since Led Zeppelin disbanded, Plant has remained active. He has released ten albums, including, in October, "Raising Sand," a calm and gorgeous collection of country and R. & B. covers that he recorded with the singer Alison Krauss.

For Led Zeppelin, whose music is so rhythmic, hard, and loud, the perils of undertaking a reunion in late middle age are greater than they might be for, say, Bob Dylan or Neil Young, who began their careers sounding like old men. Led Zeppelin's catalogue is in large part a testament to young men and their libidinal drive: lemons squeezed, inches of love delivered. (Plant, as he put it in the

ABOVE, BENOÎT JACQUES; RIGHT, ROSS HALFIN/GETTY IMAGES



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song "Hey, Hey, What Can I Do," attended to women who wanted to "ball all day," while Dylan sang about going his way while you went yours.) Still, it's unlikely that you will see another band with a collective age of two hundred and twenty-four that is as ferocious as this one. (Page, the oldest member, is sixty-three; Jason Bonham, the youngest, is forty-one.)

The O_2 Arena is not hospitable to amplified sound, and the audio quality depended largely on where you were sitting. From where I sat, fairly far from the stage, Plant seemed to be singing over a big muddle. Heard from the floor, the group sounded hard and coherent, and close to the stage the sound was fierce. Plant is no longer the priapic castrato (mull that one) that he once was—many of the songs were transposed down a few notes—but his charisma is undiminished. Before playing "Nobody's Fault But Mine," from 1976, he joked that the band first heard the song performed at a Mississippi church in 1932. During another break, he noted that people from fifty countries had come to the show. "This is the fifty-first," Plant said, as the band launched into "Kashmir," from "Physical Graffiti," the evening's highlight.

"Kashmir" is as good an example as any of Zeppelin's weird genius. The lumbering riff pits three guitar beats against two drumbeats, executing a Sisyphean march that cycles over and over without becoming tiresome; on the record, it is the shortest eight-and-a-half-minute song I know. Its minute-long breakdown is like one long drum sample, held together by the motion of John Bonham's dancing right foot. (P. Diddy and Schoolly D have rapped over "Kashmir.") The lyrics are allegedly inspired by the Sahara Desert—"the storm that leaves no trace"—and the combination of strings, guitar, and Mellotron keyboard has often been described as Middle Eastern. In concert, though, it became clear that "Middle Eastern" is just one way of capturing an implausibly big and eerie song that wanders through a spooky fog in enormous boots and could just as easily be about settling on the moon or diving to the bottom of the ocean.

Led Zeppelin version 2.0 did a magnificent job with it. Plant's voice was rich and strong, and the mingling of Page's guitar with Jones's keyboards was thrilling. The distorted whine could have been a cue in a summer-blockbuster score, perhaps for the moment when the dragon decides to eat Baltimore. Jason Bonham is a fussier player than his father was, and a bit anxious for my taste, but he provided the necessary weight, in a song that could easily make an average drummer seem desperate.

There were several moments when Page's complex compositions defeated him as a performer. "Stairway to Heaven" was one of the few numbers that never quite hung together, mostly because of the fast, tricky figures, which Page struggled to nail. (His inaccuracies have long been part of his charm.) On the recorded version, the transitions between the seven sections are metrically subtle and dramatically balanced—the song is famous for more than hedgerows—but at the O_2 Arena the narrative line eluded the band. By contrast, the encore rendition of "Whole Lotta Love" (1969), a song not about making love but about fucking, was gloriously brutal and noisy. During the middle section, which expands into noise before the reprise of the main riff, Page played his guitar with a violin bow, unleashing a blizzard of sound that made the recorded version seem timid.

In November, the English rock band the Cult announced that it planned to tour in 2008 with a band whose name starts with an "l" and has a "z" in it, and rumors have floated that next summer Led Zeppelin is going to play at the Bonnaroo Music Festival, in Tennessee. This might seem like a good idea, but Led Zeppelin is a cover band now, covering its own material. Without John Bonham, the band can only *sound* like Led Zeppelin; it can't *be* Led Zeppelin. The band should turn down the money and let its record stand. The failed gigs of the nineteen-eighties and nineties have been supplanted by a triumph, and the band should be pleased to have done Ertegun proud with such a spirited performance. I look forward to any chance I get to see Plant, Page, or Jones play live. But let the songs remain. ♦

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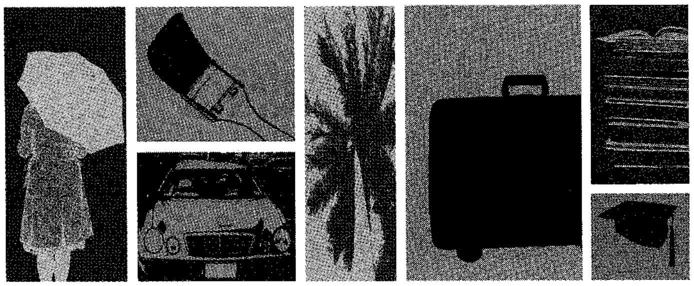

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THE THEATRE

FAMILY PLANNING

Tracy Letts and Aaron Sorkin on irreconcilable differences.

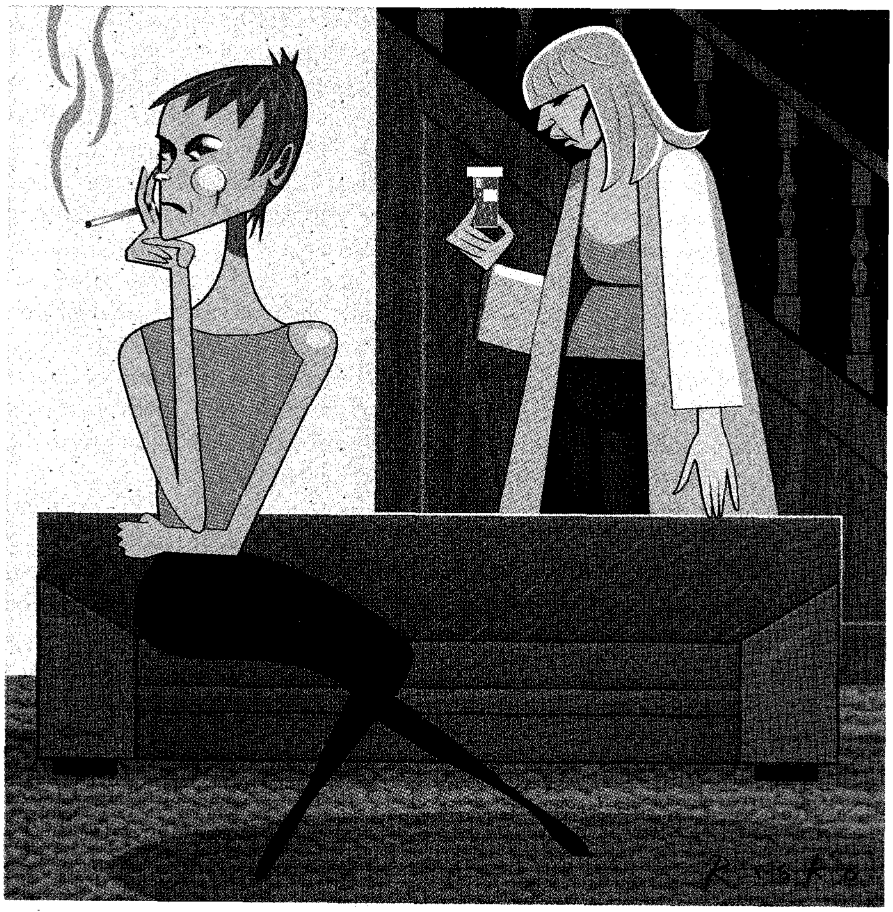
BY HILTON ALS

In much of his work, the forty-two-year-old Oklahoman playwright Tracy Letts beautifully captures the puritan streak in the American grain. Like the filmmaker Sam Peckinpah and the Southern novelist and short-story writer Flannery O'Connor, Letts is an artist who creates drama by pitting violence against our banal sense of decency. Having done that, he turns his sights on our godlessness, too, our lack of faith. Letts's strongest characters will have nothing to do with faith: where would it get them, except stuck—in hope? While their all-encompassing atheism can be blamed on a number of factors—poverty, alcoholism, a welfare system that barely knows they exist—Letts's characters, at least those in his early work, never flaunt their psychology to keep you interested. Instead, you are drawn in by the nearly somnambulistic logic of their destiny: they are born creeps, and you want to see how far they can go in mucking up the world. You don't so much identify with them as feel superior to them—at first. But once that feeling passes you find yourself succumbing to a certain uneasiness about your own life, brought to the surface by Letts's revelations.

In his comic and finely observed scripts, Letts makes his often surreal situations feel very real: the secret is in the details. His derelict environments are a visual corollary to his characters' disturbing dialogue. In his first play, "Killer Joe" (1993), the story of a drug dealer who plots to have his mother killed for the insurance money, Letts describes the set this way: "Place: A trailer home on the outskirts of Dallas, Texas. . . . The furnishings and decorations in the trailer are seedy and cheap; walls covered with ugly wood paneling; tattered, smoke-stained plastic shades covering the windows; kitchen filled with dirty, mismatched cups and utensils, many of them fast-food giveaways." In "Bug" (1996), a forty-four-year-old battered divorced waitress lives in a cramped motel room on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. She washes her dirty dishes in the bathroom sink; her bed is a rumpled mess. By the end of the play, her room is as much of a bomb site as her emotional state.

Although the characters in Letts's latest play, "August: Osage County" (at the Imperial), may be better educated and more financially successful than his earlier characters, they still live in a heap of discomfort. The action takes place in what Letts describes as "a rambling country house outside Pawhuska, Oklahoma, sixty miles northwest of Tulsa. . . . At right, the kitchen. Country cooks have served their duty here, and amidst the clutter and grease, their ghosts perhaps still patrol. . . . The copper cookware hanging from the pot rack above the stove is cold and dusty, and the room is little more than storage space for that now." The house is a mess because its proprietors, Beverly Weston (Dennis Letts, the playwright's father) and his wife, Violet (Deanna Dunagan), are too busy drinking to notice the decay, let alone the décor. Still, Beverly—a stalled poet—is aware enough of his and Violet's decline to want to hire a maid to cook and help care for Violet, who is on a lot of medication, some of it prescribed: the poor thing has cancer of the mouth, as well as of the mind. She's constantly stoned, shouting at whoever will listen to her drama, which alternates between histrionics, dime-store readings of others, and waspish rejoinders. As a character, Violet is a meaner, more logical Collette Reardon, the hopeless pill-popper whom the former "Saturday Night Live" comedian Cheri Oteri played so brilliantly. Beverly hires Johnna (Kimberly Guerrero), a Native American woman, as much to be an audience for Violet's anger as to deal with the household chores.

That's the play's setup. In short order, a number of Paul Zindel-like "wacky" female characters begin to populate the house, including the Westons' adult daughters, Barbara, Ivy, and Karen (Amy Morton, Sally Murphy, and Mariann Mayberry). The girls show up when Beverly goes missing, not far into the first act. Violet is not especially disturbed by her husband's disappearance: she's too busy with herself. Her self-regard is monstrous, even as she hastens her own death with pills, cigarettes, and alcohol. In "Killer Joe," the title character, a hit man, wants to date the daughter of the woman he's been asked to kill. When the daughter asks him why he never got married, Joe says, "Because women are deceitful, and lying, and manipulative, and vicious, and vituperative, and blackhearted, and evil, and old." In Violet, Letts has followed Joe's recipe to a tee. The problem is that he can't concoct anything else. Seated at the dining-room table, Violet's daughters all roll around in the thick mud of their shared narcissism—a scene that reminded me of the awful daughters in the old Carol Burnett sketch routine "Mama's Place," which was itself a parody of Tennessee Williams at his most hysterical and derivative.



Deanna Dunagan and Amy Morton in "August: Osage County."

ROBERT RISKO

Letts further gilds the lily by giving each of his characters a secret, the better to generate drama. Fortunately for him, his fine director, Anna D. Shapiro, works to keep the melodrama from overtaking the rest of the show—and sometimes succeeds. Even so, the family's secrets feel as contrived as the play's regionalism—a corny mint julep laced with Valium. Letts, a potentially great writer, is at his most brilliant and intense when he writes small chamber pieces, in which his rough and scary metaphors are in synch with his disillusioned, mad characters. But here, in his Broadway début, he clearly intends to prove himself a "major" playwright. To do so, he parodies his roots, rather than revealing them. Letts could very well end up winning prizes for "August: Osage County." But so did the playwright Preston Jones, with his "Texas Trilogy," in the mid-seventies. Like Letts, Jones was a provincial writer of promise who was pulled onto the Broadway boards too soon for his own good. Now his work is rarely performed at all.

Aaron Sorkin is best known for creating the popular television series "The West Wing," but he began his career as a playwright, making his Broadway début in 1989 with the military drama "A Few Good Men" (which was subsequently turned into a Sorkin-penned film, starring Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson). Now he has returned to the stage with an ambitious multicharacter play, "The Farnsworth Invention" (at the Music Box). Still, it's rather difficult to separate Sorkin's film and television professionalism—his ability to juggle the past and present in this work is impressive—from his utter lack of interest in the dramatic artist's holy grail: exploring mystery. He's a thesis-up-front kind of guy. Within minutes, we know that David Sarnoff (Hank Azaria) is a Jewish businessman—the president of RCA—who's interested in exploiting a burgeoning new medium called television, while his counterpart, a Mormon inventor named Philo T. Farnsworth (Jimmi Simpson), is struggling with the difficulties of discovery. Sarnoff represents the suits, while Farnsworth represents all that Hollywood is most impatient with: the artist who takes his time figuring out what he means to say. In a sense, "The Farnsworth Invention" can be read as a kind of self-portrait: of the artist Sorkin wants to be versus the maker of gleaming machines that he has become.

To enjoy the play's historical elements, one must push past Sorkin's shiny competence and search for his characters' passions and demons. Sadly for Sorkin, he has been paired with the director Des McAnuff (of "Jersey Boys" and "Dracula: The Musical"). McAnuff is interested in slick projects, not in challenging writers. Together, he and Sorkin have built a toy train set for boys—prefabricated, no inspiration required. Of the two protagonists—who step out of the action from time to time, to speak to the audience—Simpson brings something to the role that Azaria doesn't allow himself: complication and subtext. Whenever Simpson leaves the stage, Sorkin's train leaves, too—and so does our attention. ♦

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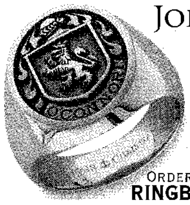

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

TWILIGHT OF THE BOOKS

What will life be like if people stop reading?

BY CALEB CRAIN

In 1937, twenty-nine per cent of American adults told the pollster George Gallup that they were reading a book. In 1955, only seventeen per cent said they were. Pollsters began asking the question with more latitude. In 1978, a survey found that fifty-five per cent of respondents had read a book in the previous six months. The question was even looser in 1998 and 2002, when the General Social Survey found that roughly seventy per cent of Americans had read a novel, a short story, a poem, or a play in the preceding twelve months. And, this August, seventy-three per cent of respondents to another poll said that they had read a book of some kind, not excluding those read for work or school, in the past year. If you didn't read the fine print, you might think that reading was on the rise.

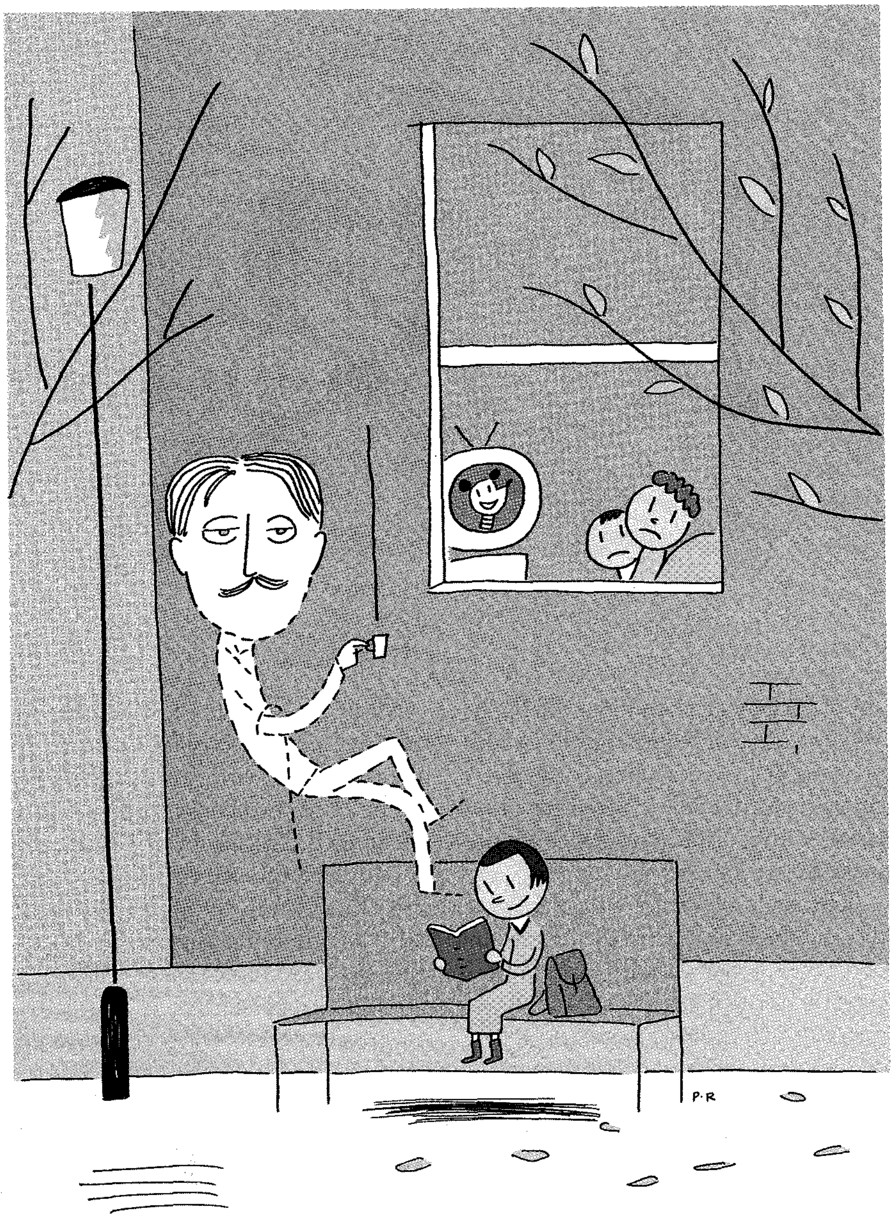
You wouldn't think so, however, if you consulted the Census Bureau and the National Endowment for the Arts, who, since 1982, have asked thousands of Americans questions about reading that are not only detailed but consistent. The results, first reported by the N.E.A. in 2004, are dispiriting. In 1982, 56.9 per cent of Americans had read a work of creative literature in the previous twelve months. The proportion fell to fifty-four per cent in 1992, and to 46.7 per cent in 2002. Last month, the N.E.A. released a follow-up report, "To Read or Not to Read," which showed correlations between the decline of reading and social phenomena as diverse as income disparity, exercise, and voting. In his introduction, the N.E.A. chairman, Dana Gioia, wrote, "Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement."

This decline is not news to those who depend on print for a living. In 1970, according to *Editor & Publisher International Year Book*, there were 62.1 million weekday newspapers in circulation—about 0.3 papers per person. Since 1990, circulation has declined steadily, and in 2006 there were just 52.3 million weekday papers—about 0.17 per person. In January 1994, forty-nine per cent of respondents told the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press that they had read a newspaper the day before. In 2006, only forty-three per cent said so, including those who read online. Book sales, meanwhile, have stagnated. The Book Industry Study Group estimates that sales fell from 8.27 books per person in 2001 to 7.93 in 2006. According to the Department of Labor, American households spent an average of a hundred and sixty-three dollars on reading in 1995 and a hundred and twenty-six dollars in 2005. In "To Read or Not to Read," the N.E.A. reports that American households' spending on books, adjusted for inflation, is "near its twenty-year low," even as the average price of a new book has increased.

More alarming are indications that Americans are losing not just the will to read but even the ability. According to the Department of Education, between 1992 and 2003 the average adult's skill in reading prose slipped one point on a five-hundred-point scale, and the proportion who were proficient—capable of such tasks as "comparing viewpoints in two editorials"—declined from fifteen per cent to thirteen. The Department of Education found that reading skills have improved moderately among fourth and eighth graders in the past decade and a half, with the largest jump occurring just before the No Child Left Behind Act took effect, but twelfth graders seem to be taking after their elders. Their reading scores fell an average of six points between 1992 and 2005, and the share of proficient twelfth-grade readers dropped from forty per cent to thirty-five per cent. The steepest declines were in "reading for literary experience"—the kind that involves "exploring themes, events, characters, settings, and the language of literary works," in the words of the department's test-makers. In 1992, fifty-four per cent of twelfth graders told the Department of Education that they talked about their reading with friends at least once a week. By 2005, only thirty-seven per cent said they did.

The erosion isn't unique to America. Some of the best data come from the Netherlands, where in 1955 researchers began to ask people to keep diaries of how they spent every fifteen minutes of their leisure time. Time-budget diaries yield richer data than surveys, and people are thought to be less likely to lie about their accomplishments if they have to do it four times an hour. Between 1955 and 1975, the decades when television was being introduced into the Netherlands, reading on weekday evenings and weekends fell from five hours a week to 3.6, while television watching rose from about ten minutes a week to more than ten hours. During the next two decades, reading continued to fall and television watching to rise, though more slowly. By 1995, reading, which had occupied twenty-one per cent of people's spare time in 1955, accounted for just nine per cent.

The most striking results were generational. In general, older Dutch people read more. It would be natural to infer from this that each generation reads more as it ages, and, indeed, the researchers found something like this to be the case for earlier generations. But, with later ones, the age-related growth in reading dwindled. The turning point seems to have come with the generation born in the nineteen-forties. By 1995, a Dutch college graduate born after 1969 was likely to spend fewer hours reading each week than a little-educated person born before 1950. As far as reading habits were concerned, academic credentials mattered less than whether a person had been raised in the era of television. The N.E.A., in its twenty years of data, has found a similar pattern. Between 1982 and 2002, the percentage of Americans who read literature declined not only in every age group but in every generation—even in those moving from youth into middle age, which is often considered the most fertile time of life for reading. We are reading less as we age, and we are reading less than people who were our age ten or twenty years ago.

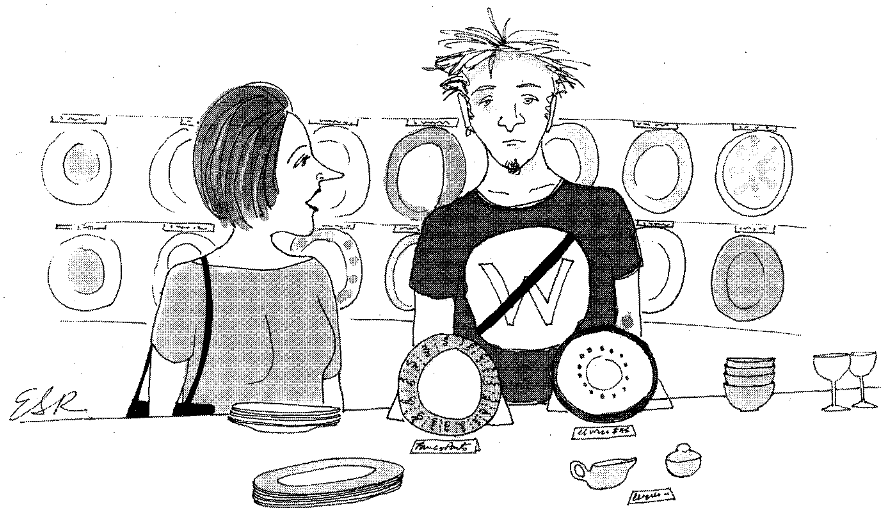


A recent study has shown a steep decline in literary reading among schoolchildren.

PHILIPPE PETIT-ROULET

There's no reason to think that reading and writing are about to become extinct, but some sociologists speculate that reading books for pleasure will one day be the province of a special "reading class," much as it was before the arrival of mass literacy, in the second half of the nineteenth century. They warn that it probably won't regain the prestige of exclusivity; it may just become "an increasingly arcane hobby." Such a shift would change the texture of society. If one person decides to watch "The Sopranos" rather than to read Leonardo Sciascia's novella "To Each His Own," the culture goes on largely as before—both viewer and reader are entertaining themselves while learning something about the Mafia in the bargain. But if, over time, many people choose television over books, then a nation's conversation with itself is likely to change. A reader learns about the world and imagines it differently from the way a viewer does; according to some experimental psychologists, a reader and a viewer even think differently. If the eclipse of reading continues, the alteration is likely to matter in ways that aren't foreseeable.

Taking the long view, it's not the neglect of reading that has to be explained but the fact that we read at all. "The act of reading is not natural," Maryanne Wolf writes in "Proust and the Squid" (Harper; $25.95), an account of the history and biology of reading. Humans started reading far too recently for



"Tad, none of these patterns are going to scream 'anarchist.'"

• •

any of our genes to code for it specifically. We can do it only because the brain's plasticity enables the repurposing of circuitry that originally evolved for other tasks—distinguishing at a glance a garter snake from a haricot vert, say.

The squid of Wolf's title represents the neurobiological approach to the study of reading. Bigger cells are easier for scientists to experiment on, and some species of squid have optic-nerve cells a hundred times as thick as mammal neurons, and up to four inches long, making them a favorite with biologists. (Two decades ago, I had a summer job washing glassware in Cape Cod's Marine Biological Laboratory. Whenever researchers extracted an optic nerve, they threw the rest of the squid into a freezer, and about once a month we took a cooler-full to the beach for grilling.) To symbolize the humanistic approach to reading, Wolf has chosen Proust, who described reading as "that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude." Perhaps inspired by Proust's example, Wolf, a dyslexia researcher at Tufts, reminisces about the nuns who taught her to read in a two-room brick schoolhouse in Illinois. But she's more of a squid person than a Proust person, and seems most at home when dissecting Proust's fruitful miracle into such brain parts as the occipital "visual association area" and "area 37's fusiform gyrus." Given the panic that takes hold of humanists when the decline of reading is discussed, her cold-blooded perspective is opportune.

Wolf recounts the early history of reading, speculating about developments in brain wiring as she goes. For example, from the eighth to the fifth millennia B.C.E., clay tokens were used in Mesopotamia for tallying livestock and other goods. Wolf suggests that, once the simple markings on the tokens were understood not merely as squiggles but as representations of, say, ten sheep, they would have put more of the brain to work. She draws on recent research with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), a technique that maps blood flow in the brain during a given task, to show that meaningful squiggles activate not only the occipital regions responsible for vision but also temporal and parietal regions associated with language and computation. If a particular squiggle was repeated on a number of tokens, a group of nerves might start to specialize in recognizing it, and other nerves to specialize in connecting to language centers that handled its meaning.

In the fourth millennium B.C.E., the Sumerians developed cuneiform, and the Egyptians hieroglyphs. Both scripts began with pictures of things, such as a beetle or a hand, and then some of these symbols developed more abstract meanings, representing ideas in some cases and sounds in others. Readers had to recognize hundreds of symbols, some of which could stand for either a word or a sound, an ambiguity that probably slowed down decoding. Under this heavy cognitive burden, Wolf imagines, the Sumerian reader's brain would have behaved the way modern brains do when reading Chinese, which also mixes phonetic and ideographic elements and seems to stimulate brain activity in a pattern distinct from that of people reading the Roman alphabet. Frontal regions associated with muscle memory would probably also have gone to work, because the Sumerians learned their characters by writing them over and over, as the Chinese do today.

Complex scripts like Sumerian and Egyptian were written only by scribal élites. A major breakthrough occurred around 750 B.C.E., when the Greeks, borrowing characters from a Semitic language, perhaps Phoenician, developed a writing system that had just twenty-four letters. There had been scripts with a limited number of characters before, as there had been consonants and even occasionally vowels, but the Greek alphabet was the first whose letters recorded every significant sound element in a spoken language in a one-to-one correspondence, give or take a few diphthongs. In ancient Greek, if you knew how to pronounce a word, you knew how to spell it, and you could sound out almost any word you saw, even if you'd never heard it before. Children learned to read and write Greek in about three years, somewhat faster than modern children learn English, whose alphabet is more ambiguous. The ease democratized literacy; the ability to read and write spread to citizens who didn't specialize in it. The classicist Eric A. Havelock believed that the alphabet changed "the character of the Greek consciousness."

Wolf doesn't quite second that claim. She points out that it is possible to read efficiently a script that combines ideograms and phonetic elements, something that many Chinese do daily. The alphabet, she suggests, entailed not a qualitative difference but an accumulation of small quantitative ones, by helping more readers reach efficiency sooner. "The efficient reading brain," she writes, "quite literally has more time to think." Whether that development sparked Greece's flowering she leaves to classicists to debate, but she agrees with Havelock that writing was probably a contributive factor, because it freed the Greeks from the necessity of keeping their whole culture, including the Iliad and the Odyssey, memorized.

The scholar Walter J. Ong once speculated that television and similar media are taking us into an era of "secondary orality," akin to the primary orality that existed before the emergence of text. If so, it is worth trying to understand how different primary orality must have been from our own mind-set. Havelock theorized that, in ancient Greece, the effort required to preserve knowledge colored everything. In Plato's day, the word *mimesis* referred to an actor's performance of his role, an audience's identification with a performance, a pupil's recitation of his lesson, and an apprentice's emulation of his master. Plato, who was literate, worried about the kind of trance or emotional enthrallment that came over people in all these situations, and Havelock inferred from this that the idea of distinguishing the knower from the known was then still a novelty. In a society that had only recently learned to take notes, learning something still meant abandoning yourself to it. "Enormous powers of poetic memorization could be purchased only at the cost of total loss of objectivity," he wrote.

It's difficult to prove that oral and literate people think differently; orality, Havelock observed, doesn't "fossilize" except through its nemesis, writing. But some supporting evidence came to hand in 1974, when Aleksandr R. Luria, a Soviet psychologist, published a study based on interviews conducted in the nineteen-thirties with illiterate and newly literate peasants in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Luria found that illiterates had a "graphic-functional" way of thinking that seemed to vanish as they were schooled. In naming colors, for example, literate people said "dark blue" or "light yellow," but illiterates used metaphorical names like "liver," "peach," "decayed teeth," and "cotton in bloom." Literates saw optical illusions; illiterates sometimes didn't. Experimenters showed peasants drawings of a hammer, a saw, an axe, and a log and then asked them to choose the three items that were similar. Illiterates resisted, saying that all the items were useful. If pressed, they considered throwing out the hammer; the situation of chopping wood seemed more cogent to them than any conceptual category. One peasant, informed that someone had grouped the three tools together, discarding the log, replied, "Whoever told you that must have been crazy," and another suggested, "Probably he's got a lot of firewood." One frustrated experimenter showed a picture of three adults and a child and declared, "Now, clearly the child doesn't belong in this group," only to have a peasant answer:

> Oh, but the boy must stay with the others! All three of them are working, you see, and if they have to keep running out to fetch things, they'll never get the job done, but the boy can do the running for them.

Illiterates also resisted giving definitions of words and refused to make logical inferences about hypothetical situations. Asked by Luria's staff about polar bears, a peasant grew testy: "What the cock knows how to do, he does. What I know, I say, and nothing beyond that!" The illiterates did not talk about themselves except in terms of their tangible possessions. "What can I say about my own heart?" one asked.

In the nineteen-seventies, the psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole tried to replicate Luria's findings among the Vai, a rural people in Liberia. Since some Vai were illiterate, some were schooled in English, and others were literate in the Vai's own script, the researchers hoped to be able to distinguish cognitive changes caused by schooling from those caused specifically by literacy. They found that English schooling and English literacy improved the ability to talk about language and solve logic puzzles, as literacy had done with Luria's peasants. But literacy in Vai script improved performance on only a few language-related tasks. Scribner and Cole's modest conclusion—"Literacy makes some difference to some skills in some contexts"—convinced some people that the literate mind

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was not so different from the oral one after all. But others have objected that it was misguided to separate literacy from schooling, suggesting that cognitive changes came with the culture of literacy rather than with the mere fact of it. Also, the Vai script, a syllabary with more than two hundred characters, offered nothing like the cognitive efficiency that Havelock ascribed to Greek. Reading Vai, Scribner and Cole admitted, was "a complex problem-solving process," usually performed slowly.

Soon after this study, Ong synthesized existing research into a vivid picture of the oral mind-set. Whereas literates can rotate concepts in their minds abstractly, orals embed their thoughts in stories. According to Ong, the best way to preserve ideas in the absence of writing is to "think memorable thoughts," whose zing insures their transmission. In an oral culture, cliché and stereotype are valued, as accumulations of wisdom, and analysis is frowned upon, for putting those accumulations at risk. There's no such concept as plagiarism, and redundancy is an asset that helps an audience follow a complex argument. Opponents in struggle are more memorable than calm and abstract investigations, so bards revel in name-calling and in "enthusiastic description of physical violence." Since there's no way to erase a mistake invisibly, as one may in writing, speakers tend not to correct themselves at all. Words have their present meanings but no older ones, and if the past seems to tell a story with values different from current ones, it is either forgotten or silently adjusted. As the scholars Jack Goody and Ian Watt observed, it is only in a literate culture that the past's inconsistencies have to be accounted for, a process that encourages skepticism and forces history to diverge from myth.

Upon reaching classical Greece, Wolf abandons history, because the Greeks' alphabet-reading brains probably resembled ours, which can be readily put into scanners. Drawing on recent imaging studies, she explains in detail how a modern child's brain wires itself for literacy. The ground is laid in preschool, when parents read to a child, talk with her, and encourage awareness of sound elements like rhyme and alliteration, perhaps with "Mother Goose" poems. Scans show that when a child first starts to read she has to use more of her brain than adults do. Broad regions light up in both hemispheres. As a child's neurons specialize in recognizing letters and become more efficient, the regions activated become smaller.

At some point, as a child progresses from decoding to fluent reading, the route of signals through her brain shifts. Instead of passing along a "dorsal route" through occipital, temporal, and parietal regions in both hemispheres, reading starts to move along a faster and more efficient "ventral route," which is confined to the left hemisphere. With the gain in time and the freed-up brainpower, Wolf suggests, a fluent reader is able to integrate more of her own thoughts and feelings into her experience. "The secret at the heart of reading," Wolf writes, is "the time it frees for the brain to have thoughts deeper than those that came before." Imaging studies suggest that in many cases of dyslexia the right hemisphere never disengages, and reading remains effortful.

In a recent book claiming that television and video games were "making our minds sharper," the journalist Steven Johnson argued that since we value reading for "exercising the mind," we should value electronic media for offering a superior "cognitive workout." But, if Wolf's evidence is right, Johnson's metaphor of exercise is misguided. When reading goes well, Wolf suggests, it feels effortless, like drifting down a river rather than rowing up it. It makes you smarter because it leaves more of your brain alone. Ruskin once compared reading to a conversation with the wise and noble, and Proust corrected him. It's much better than that, Proust wrote. To read is "to receive a communication with another way of thinking, all the while remaining alone, that is, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power that one has in solitude and that conversation dissipates immediately."

Wolf has little to say about the general decline of reading, and she doesn't much speculate about the function of the brain under the influence of television and newer media. But there is research suggesting that secondary orality and literacy don't mix. In a study published this year, experimenters varied the way that people took in a PowerPoint presentation about the country of Mali. Those who were allowed to read silently were more likely to agree with the statement "The presentation was interesting," and those who read along with an audiovisual commentary were more likely to agree with the statement "I did not learn anything from this presentation." The silent readers remembered more, too, a finding in line with a series of British studies in which people who read transcripts of television newscasts, political programs, advertisements, and science shows recalled more information than those who had watched the shows themselves.

The antagonism between words and moving images seems to start early. In August, scientists at the University of Washington revealed that babies aged between eight and sixteen months know on average six to eight fewer words for every hour of baby DVDs and videos they watch daily. A 2005 study in Northern California found that a television in the bedroom lowered the standardized-test scores of third graders. And the conflict continues throughout a child's development. In 2001, after analyzing data on more than a million students around the world, the researcher Micha Razel found "little room for doubt" that television worsened performance in reading, science, and math. The relationship wasn't a straight line but "an inverted check mark": a small amount of television seemed to benefit children; more hurt. For nine-year-olds, the optimum was two hours a day; for seventeen-year-olds, half an hour. Razel guessed that the younger children were watching educational shows, and, indeed, researchers have shown that a five-year-old boy who watches "Sesame Street" is likely to have higher grades even in high school. Razel noted, however, that fifty-five per cent of students were exceeding their optimal viewing time by three hours a day, thereby lowering their academic achievement by roughly one grade level.

The Internet, happily, does not so far seem to be antagonistic to literacy. Researchers recently gave Michigan children and teen-agers home computers in exchange for permission to monitor their Internet use. The study found that grades and reading scores rose with the amount of time spent online. Even visits to pornography Web sites improved academic performance. Of course, such synergies may disappear if the Internet continues its YouTube-fuelled evolution away from print and toward television.

No effort of will is likely to make reading popular again. Children may be browbeaten, but adults resist interference with their pleasures. It may simply be the case that many Americans prefer to learn about the world and to entertain themselves with television and other streaming media, rather than with the printed word, and that it is taking a few generations for them to shed old habits like newspapers and novels. The alternative is that we are nearing the end of a pendulum swing, and that reading will return, driven back by forces as complicated as those now driving it away.

But if the change is permanent, and especially if the slide continues, the world will feel different, even to those who still read. Because the change has been happening slowly for decades, everyone has a sense of what is at stake, though it is rarely put into words. There is something to gain, of course, or no one would ever put down a book and pick up a remote. Streaming media give actual pictures and sounds instead of mere descriptions of them. "Television completes the cycle of the human sensorium," Marshall McLuhan proclaimed in 1967. Moving and talking images are much richer in information about a performer's appearance, manner, and tone of voice, and they give us the impression that we know more about her health and mood, too. The viewer may not catch all the details of a candidate's health-care plan, but he has a much more definite sense of her as a personality, and his response to her is therefore likely to be more full of emotion. There is nothing like this connection in print. A feeling for a writer never touches the fact of the writer herself, unless reader and writer happen to meet. In fact, from Shakespeare to Pynchon, the personalities of many writers have been mysterious.

Emotional responsiveness to streaming media harks back to the world of primary orality, and, as in Plato's day, the solidarity amounts almost to a mutual possession. "Electronic technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement," in McLuhan's words. The viewer feels at home with his show, or else he changes the channel. The closeness makes it hard to negotiate differences of opinion. It can be amusing to read a magazine whose principles you despise, but it is almost unbearable to watch such a television show. And so, in a culture of secondary orality, we may be less likely to spend time with ideas we disagree with.

Self-doubt, therefore, becomes less likely. In fact, doubt of any kind is rarer. It is easy to notice inconsistencies in two written accounts placed side by side. With text, it is even easy to keep track of differing levels of authority behind different pieces of information. The trust that a reader grants to the New York *Times*, for example, may vary sentence by sentence. A comparison of two video reports, on the other hand, is cumbersome. Forced to choose between conflicting stories on television, the viewer falls back on hunches, or on what he believed before he started watching. Like the peasants studied by Luria, he thinks in terms of situations and story lines rather than abstractions.

And he may have even more trouble than Luria's peasants in seeing himself as others do. After all, there is no one looking back at the television viewer. He is alone, though he, and his brain, may be too distracted to notice it. The reader is also alone, but the N.E.A. reports that readers are more likely than non-readers to play sports, exercise, visit art museums, attend theatre, paint, go to music events, take photographs, and volunteer. Proficient readers are also more likely to vote. Perhaps readers venture so readily outside because what they experience in solitude gives them confidence. Perhaps reading is a prototype of independence. No matter how much one worships an author, Proust wrote, "all he can do is give us desires." Reading somehow gives us the boldness to act on them. Such a habit might be quite dangerous for a democracy to lose. ♦

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BOOKS

SQUALL LINES

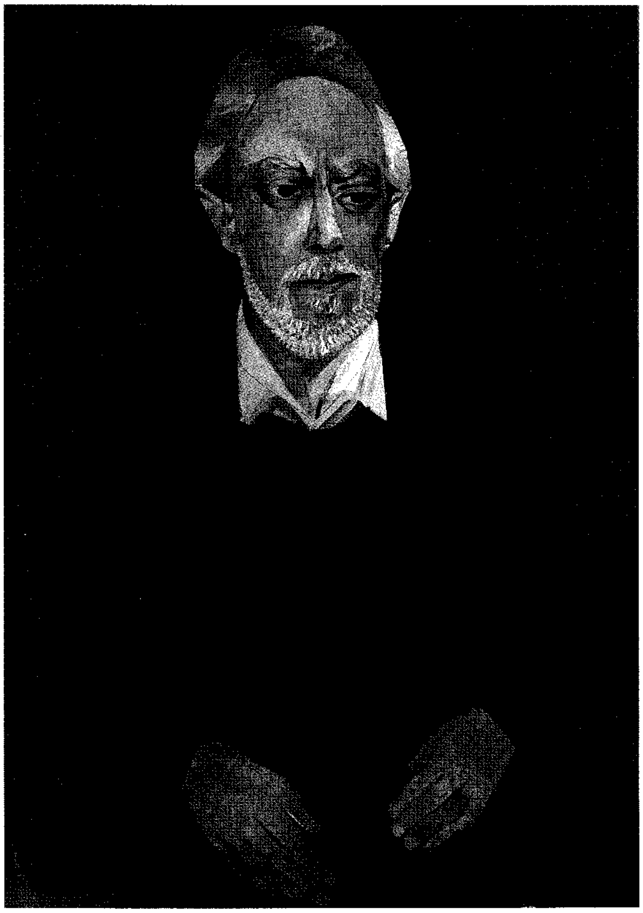
J. M. Coetzee's "Diary of a Bad Year."

BY JAMES WOOD

There are people who think of J. M. Coetzee as a cold writer, and he might agree, or pretend to agree. "If he were a warmer person he would no doubt find it all easier: life, love, poetry," he writes of himself in his memoir "Youth." "But warmth is not in his nature." The protagonist of Coetzee's new novel, "Diary of a Bad Year" (Viking; $24.95), is, like his creator, an aging South African novelist resident in Australia, who muses at one moment that his father surely thought him a selfish child "who has turned into a cold man." His art, he laments, is "not great-souled." It lacks "generosity, fails to celebrate life, lacks love."

Yet this is the cold air just beyond the reach of a fire. Coetzee's chaste, exact, ashen prose may look like the very embers of restraint, but it is drawn, again and again, to passionate extremity: an uneducated gardener forced to live like an animal off the South African earth ("Life & Times of Michael K"); a white woman dying of cancer while a black township burns, and writing, in her last days, a letter of brutal truths to her daughter ("Age of Iron"); a white woman raped on her farm by a gang of black men, and impregnated ("Disgrace"); a recent amputee, the victim of a road accident that mangled a leg, helpless in his Adelaide apartment, and awkwardly in love with his Croatian nurse ("Slow Man"). Coetzee seems compelled to test his celebrated restraint against subjects and ideas whose extremity challenges novelistic representation.

The excessiveness of witnessed cruelty produces a corresponding excess of shame. In "Disgrace," for instance, David Lurie is locked in a bathroom by the intruders while they rape his daughter. Lurie is a disgraced academic—he had an affair with a student and has lost his job—but his real disgrace begins after this episode. He starts helping out at an animal clinic run by a friend of his daughter's. He cannot get used to seeing the countless numbers of dogs put down and then cremated; he will cremate the animals himself rather than watch the workmen casually breaking the legs of the corpses to make them fit better into the furnace. Why does he do it? It is not rational. He does it, he decides, for himself: "For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing." In Coetzee's "Elizabeth Costello," the title character, an august Australian novelist, argues that the daily slaughter of animals is morally comparable to the Holocaust. When a college president wonders if Costello's vegetarianism is born of moral conviction, she explains that it "comes out of a desire to save my soul."



In Coetzee's work, cruelty surges beyond bearable depiction.

RICCARDO VECCHIO

In Coetzee's work, emotions like shame, guilt, and disgrace surge beyond rational discussion just as cruelty surges beyond bearable depiction. And here, in his latest novel, another novelist protagonist gives voice to a feeling of unbearable shame, this time at the Bush Administration's connivance at torture:

> Their shamelessness is quite extraordinary. Their denials are less than half-hearted. . . . The issue for individual Americans becomes a moral one: how, in the face of this shame to which I am subjected, do I behave? How do I save my honour?

Later, this protagonist asserts that if he heard that some American had committed suicide "rather than live in disgrace, I would fully understand." He can understand because "the generation of white South Africans to which I belong, and the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that too, will go bowed under the shame of the crimes that were committed in their name." A Finn, hearing Sibelius's Fifth Symphony for the first time, nearly a century ago, he argues, must have felt pride that "one of us could put together such sounds, proud that out of nothing we human beings can make such stuff. Contrast with that one's feelings of shame that *we, our people*, have made Guantanamo."

The central characters of both "Elizabeth Costello," which appeared in 2003, and "Diary of a Bad Year" are novelists, and novelists in the act of dispensing strong opinions. Elizabeth Costello has been giving public lectures, which are reproduced in the novel; the protagonist of Coetzee's new book has been asked by his German publisher to contribute to a volume of essays that will gather the "Strong Opinions" (this is its proposed title) of six prominent contemporary writers. Many of the protagonist's essays are reproduced in the novel we are reading. Naturally, the reader wants to make Coetzee's novels confessional, to claim these opinions as his rightful children. But Coetzee explicitly complicates the question of his paternity, so that these books read less like confessions than like books about confession.

Lest that sound dry, it should be said that "Diary of a Bad Year" is an involving, argumentative, moving novel: if not quite "great-souled," then deep-souled. Coetzee smudges the traces of his authorial DNA by using a framing device that both hints at and disavows connections between the novelist protagonist and the actual writer. The South African novelist at the center of the new book is teasingly called "Señor C" by his neighbors, but he is by no means identical to J. M. Coetzee, who was born in South Africa in 1940, taught at the University of Chicago before moving to Australia, and won the Nobel Prize in 2003. Señor C is six years older than the Nobel Laureate, often writes elegantly and sometimes a bit demotically ("Most scientists can't write for toffee," he claims at one point), and expresses regret that people think of him not as a novelist but as "a pedant who dabbles in fiction." Distinguished he may be, but he feels obscure, overlooked, worn out. Stockholm has not, apparently, called. He lives in an apartment block in Sydney, where he meets Anya, an attractive young neighbor who is currently unemployed but used to be a receptionist in "the hospitality industry." Like the elderly Nathan Zuckerman, he is uselessly afflicted with desire, and smothers his lust by asking Anya if she would like to type up the "strong opinions" he has been speaking into a Dictaphone. After a formulaic demurral—as in bank-heist movies, the last important addition to the team always spends a scene resisting—she agrees. Anya calls him Señor C because, it seems, she had thought that he was a South American novelist. Señor C's strong opinions are divided into thirty-one brief chapters, with titles like "On intelligent design" and "On Guantanamo Bay." They are a confounding mixture of the banal, the extreme, and the scintillating. Inevitably, his attacks on George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Guantánamo, though righteous, have a slightly overinhabited quality, as if too many other people had been squatting in their public rooms. Coetzee, I suspect, wants us to reflect on the differences in rhetoric between public and private ideas. A passage like the following, from a chapter entitled "On terrorism," sounds like a bull with a bullhorn, and is very different in tone from the more feline Coetzee, who would surely rather have his claws pulled than commit to print the phrase "It's déjà vu all over again":

> Well, what do we see today, in 2005? Not only the re-emergence of old-fashioned restrictions of the baldest sort on freedom of speech—witness legislation in the United States, the UK, and now Australia—but surveillance (by shadowy agencies) of the entire world's telephonic and electronic communications. It's déjà vu all over again.

Broadly, the intellectual and political persona of Señor C, as we can decipher it, is left-leaning, subversive, cynical, anarchic, and preternaturally sensitive. He is no great lover of democracy (would history be much different, he asks, if elections had been decided by the toss of a coin rather than by majority vote?); he dislikes the pro-Bush government of John Howard; he is shamed by Guantánamo, by torture; he defends the cinematic representation of pedophilia by adult actors young enough to pass as children; he argues in favor not quite of intelligent design but of enlightened deism. "An intelligent universe evolves purposively over time, even if the purpose in question may for ever be beyond the grasp of the intellect," he writes. "One might want to give that intelligence the handy monosyllabic name *God*." Like Elizabeth Costello, he seems to quiver with shame and abhorrence before the carnage of animals raised for food: a chapter entitled "On the slaughter of animals" describes the kitchens we see on television cooking programs as if from the estranged eye of the non-carnivore. The neat little pile of raw meat on the counter must look "much the same as human flesh (why should it not?)," he writes. "So, to the eye unused to carnivore cuisine, the inference does not come automatically ('naturally') that the flesh on display is cut from a carcass (animal) rather than from a corpse (human)."

These essays are always interesting, and some are dazzling. The last of the strong opinions, "On the afterlife," is a beautiful piece of argumentation in which Señor C probes at the Christian notion of Heaven and Hell, and at the idea that the self continues to exist as itself after death. If there is no proposed continuity between the self on earth and the self in Heaven, he says, then it is incoherent to suggest that good behavior on earth will be rewarded in paradise—such rewards can mean nothing to us as we understand them now. But, if there is a continuity between selves, then how will Heaven avoid replicating earth? This is even more acute if one believes in Hell:

> Either the soul in hell has a memory of an earlier life—a life misspent—or it has not. If it has no such memory, then eternal damnation must seem to that soul the worst, most arbitrary injustice in the universe, proof indeed that the universe is evil. Only the memory of who I was and how I spent my time on earth will permit those feelings of infinite regret that are said to be the quintessence of damnation.

"Diary of a Bad Year" takes a daring form: Señor C's essays occupy the bulk of each page, more or less, but running beneath them, like the news crawl on a TV screen, are what read like short diary entries by Señor C and by Anya, which offer a running commentary on the developing relationship of employer and employee, and which convey the plot of the novel, such as it is. So a typical page is segmented like the back of a scarab beetle, and the reader must choose to read either one narrative strand at a time or one page at a time and thus two or three strands simultaneously. In practice, one does a bit of both—a gulp of essay, a snatch of diary—and the broken form usefully, but relatively painlessly, corrupts any easy relation to innocent continuity.

Coetzee wants to interrupt the usual smoothness because, in part, he wants to remind us of the provisionality, the unfinishedness, of ideas as we encounter them in novelistic form. The diary excerpts in the lower parts of the page function as the rebellious downstairs of this intellectual mansion: it is where we witness Anya and her boyfriend, Alan, who voted for John Howard, mocking the embarrassing seepage of the liberal bleeding heart. To them, and especially to Alan, a hard-nosed financial consultant, this elderly writer is out of touch, an old fart, an unworldly mandarin. Anya begins to chafe under his rule, and cheekily corrects his English; perhaps she, then, is the source of phrases like "The rest is history" and "It's déjà vu all over again." She resists his sensitivity to collective shame, proffering a clean, modern individualism: "As long as it is not your fault, as long as you are not responsible the dishonour doesn't stick to you." Alan, meanwhile, has discovered that Señor C has a large bank account, and that the money is pledged to the Anti-Vivisection League of Australia. He has designs on the money. This narratological downstairs is also the place where Coetzee has Señor C remind us that his opinions do not necessarily represent his deepest thoughts (and, by extension, that we should avoid any attempt to lead them back to Coetzee). "Tread carefully," he says to Anya. "You may be seeing less of my inmost depths than you believe." And later: "I should thoroughly revise my opinions, that is what I should do. I should cull the older, more decrepit ones, find newer, up-to-date ones to replace them. But where does one go to find up-to-date opinions? To Anya? To her lover and moral guide, the broker-man Alan? Can one buy fresh opinions in the marketplace?"

In truth, one reads the top section of each page with mounting excitement, and the bottom two sections rather dutifully. The properly postmodern qualifying of Señor C's opinions ("I should thoroughly revise my opinions") has a slightly academic explicitness, a self-conscious legibility, as did that moment in Coetzee's last novel, "Slow Man," when the novelist Elizabeth Costello suddenly entered the amputee's life and he started uttering obviously allegorical protests to her: "You treat me like a puppet. . . . You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you." Coetzee's deliberate complications can seem a little simple here, and it hardly helps that Anya and Alan are uninteresting caricatures. As "Slow Man" also demonstrates, one of the difficulties of this kind of allegorizing may be that, even as the novelist is being self-conscious about his own fiction, he writes up his experimentalism in the most rudimentary and conventional kind of "realism." Anya confides to her diary such things as "Three years together and still Alan has the hots for me, hots so hot there are times I think he is going to burst." In regard to Señor C, Coetzee seems to have given a lot of thought to the question of who is speaking whose words, and for whom; but no such thought seems to have been spent in regard to Anya's voice and audience. As a result, the relationship between her and the old novelist is a good deal less absorbing than that between the protagonist of "Slow Man" and his solidly real, thick-waisted Croatian nurse.

"Why can't you ever relax at parties?"

Besides, Coetzee does not really need this subplot. The dynamism of the book is intellectual, and the real drama is at the top of the page. Coetzee is devoted to Dostoyevsky, and "Elizabeth Costello" made clear that part of that devotion has to do with what the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called the "dialogic" nature of Dostoyevsky's arguments. Bakhtin noted that it is impossible to infer from the novels what Dostoyevsky believed, because no single idea ever gains authorial dominance. Instead, ideas, like the characters themselves, are in constant circulation and mutual qualification. It is how Dostoyevsky the ardent Christian was able to argue against himself, awarding Ivan Karamazov the most devastating petition against conventional Christian belief ever mounted in a novel. Coetzee is interested in how we profess ideas, both in life and in novels. We tend to think of ourselves as intellectually stable, the oaken pile of principle driven reassuringly deep into the ground. All the Presidential-campaign cant about "values" testifies to this; to flip-flop is to flop. But what if our ideas are, rather, as Virginia Woolf imagined consciousness: a constant flicker of different and self-cancelling perceptions, entertained for a moment and then exchanged for other ones? Imagine a fervent Christian, who has always believed in the afterlife. One night, waking in terror, he realizes, for only a second, but absolutely, that there is no afterlife. The terror passes, and the next morning he reaffirms his public vows. He does not succumb to doubt. Still, the question remains: what has happened to his orthodoxy? If it has not been cancelled or refuted by the nightmarish doubt, does it now contain, like a trapped smell, the ghost of its opposite?

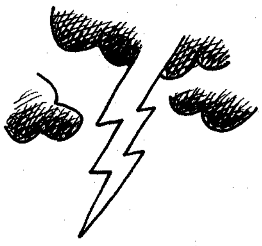
This is what it might mean to "novelize" an idea, to make an idea a kind of character, with a character's inconsistencies and illogicalities and unreason. When, for instance, Señor C compares the pride of Finns hearing Sibelius to the shame of we who have helped create Guantánamo, he establishes an opposition with which he confidently ends his essay: "Musical creation on the one hand, a machine for inflicting pain and humiliation on the other: the best and the worst that human beings are capable of." But is this meaningful opposition? Music may be the best of which we are capable (though why not, say, penicillin?), but it is not clear that Guantánamo, for all its horrors, is the very worst. And one is hardly the reciprocal of the other. Music, being nonreferential, tends to inflame our irrationality; we can be blinded by the glare of its sublimity, and spurred to entertain "ideas" that wither in the cold silence of day.

The second part of "Diary of a Bad Year" records the private ideas and responses of Señor C—what he calls his "gentler set of opinions." These are more passionate, more fragmentary, and more irrational than his public utterances. One of them, "On J. S. Bach," begins:

> The best proof we have that life is good, and therefore that there may perhaps be a God after all, who has our welfare at heart, is that to each of us, on the day we are born, comes the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. It comes as a gift, unearned, unmerited, for free.

But this is barely an idea; it is a spasm. At such moments, with the help of Coetzee's sensitivity to the uneven flow and counterflow of ideas, we can glimpse a mind moving among thoughts, some of them solid and argued for, some specious, some thrilling but fleeting, others irrational but suggestive. And, despite all the postmodern games, we glimpse, of course, not just Señor C's but also J. M. Coetzee's mind at work. This, he seems to say to us, is what it means for a novelist to entertain an idea.

Unlike the philosopher, the novelist may take an idea beyond its rational terminus, to the point where the tracks start breaking up. One name for this tendency is the religious, the realm where faith replaces reason. Coetzee has always been an intensely metaphysical novelist, and in recent years the religious coloration of his metaphysics has become more pronounced. David Lurie and Elizabeth Costello offer a kind of general atonement for the shame they feel before their fellow-animals. "Slow Man" enacts a kind of religious correction of its maimed protagonist, the cannily named Paul Rayment. Wounded in a bicycling accident, he is helpless until the nurse, Marijana, begins caring for him. He falls in love with her, and lavishes on her and her family all kinds of assistance, financial and otherwise. Marijana barely thanks him. The novel seems to teach Paul that true charity expects nothing in return. Paul himself says that "*Would Jesus approve?*" is the question he puts to himself: "That is the standard I try to meet." Señor C seems to share Elizabeth Costello's neurasthenic tenderness toward the suffering of animals; and his sense of shame—as a South African; as an Australian, "the most abject of the so-called Coalition of the Willing"; and as a human animal—is essentially original sin deprived of a nameable theological origin.



The pieties of current criticism are supposed to forbid one to inquire about Coetzee's relation to this strain of theology. We are warned that it is naïve to confuse author and character, even when—especially when—that character is also a novelist. But if Coetzee's novels deflect such inquiries, they also invite them, not least because of the provoking extremity, even irrationality, of their ideas. In the last entry of this novel, "On Dostoevsky," Señor C writes:

> I read again last night the fifth chapter of the second part of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the chapter in which Ivan hands back his ticket of admission to the universe God has created, and found myself sobbing uncontrollably.

It is not the force of Ivan's reasoning, he says, that carries him along but "the accents of anguish, the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world." We can hear the same note of personal anguish in Coetzee's fiction, even as that fiction insists that it is offering not a confession but only the staging of a confession. His books makes all the right postmodern noises, but their energy lies in their besotted relationship to an older, Dostoyevskian tradition, in which we feel the desperate impress of the confessing author, however recessed and veiled.

There is a chapter in "Diary of a Bad Year" entitled "On Harold Pinter," in which Señor C discusses the playwright's Nobel Prize speech, "a savage attack on Tony Blair for his part in the war in Iraq." In one sense, Señor C says, it was a mistake, for, when a writer speaks "in one's own person—that is, not through one's art—to denounce some politician or other," that writer embarks on a war he is likely to lose. Still, he concludes, what Pinter did "may be foolhardy but it is not cowardly. And there come times when the courage and the shame are so great that all calculation, all prudence, is overwhelmed and one must act, that is to say, speak."

It is tempting to hear behind these words one Nobel Laureate discussing another; but, of course, Coetzee has not himself abandoned all calculation, even as he praises Pinter for doing so. He is not speaking here but writing about speaking. Coetzee's own Nobel lecture was not a speech but a story—an allegory involving Defoe and Robinson Crusoe, about the writer's relationship to his characters—that might easily have appeared in the pages of "Elizabeth Costello." Still, there is something finely imprudent about his passion here; a rent has been made, a cry is heard. In these times, even writing about speaking is a kind of action. ◆

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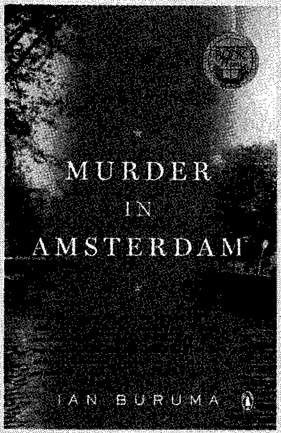

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VISUAL TROPHIES

The art of snapshots.

BY JOHN UPDIKE

Among the homely staples of twentieth-century life that have been unceremoniously retired by the microchip revolution—the typewriter, the pressed-wax record, the card catalogue—the camera loaded with film has met a swift and stealthy end. Digital cameras look much like their analog predecessors, but the viewfinder is different—a tiny TV screen, held at arm's length—and we don't have to wait for the mistakes to come back from the drugstore before discarding them. We didn't, in fact, often discard silver-based snapshots, but kept them, with their negatives, in boxes and drawers to await a definitive culling that rarely came. They began to slide into obsolescence before the turn of this century, and had already become "collectibles," with a fellowship of collectors and dealers feeding on the shoals of these silverfish as they raggedly rose from the depths of the private realm to surface in the marketplace. One prominent collector, Robert E. Jackson, of Seattle, struck up a relationship with the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, that has resulted in his donation of a hundred and thirty-eight snapshots to the institution and an exhibition, titled "The Art of the American Snapshot 1888-1978." The exhibition, which runs through the end of the year, includes two hundred and fifty-four items, all from Jackson's gift or his collection, and is commemorated with a two-hundred-and-ninety-four-page catalogue of the same name (National Gallery of Art in association with Princeton; $55).

The volume defies easy handling—it is heavier than one expects, and wordier—and an easy aesthetic response. The brief foreword, by the National Gallery's director, Earl A. Powell III, poses the critical problem nicely:

> In the years since 1888, when George Eastman and others made it possible for anyone to make a photograph, billions of snapshots have been made in this country alone. Most of them poignantly remind their makers of a person, place, or event with special meaning or importance to their lives.

My own shoeboxes of curling, yellowing snapshots derive their fascination almost entirely from my personal connections with the depicted matter—grandparents and parents, cousins and schoolmates, houses I once lived in, vistas and furniture lifted from my private *temps perdu*. The fascination extends to snapshots of my father in his First World War soldier's uniform and my mother in her college hockey outfit, youthful and hopeful in the void before I was born, but thins with snapshots *they* saved of people I never knew, and reaches the vanishing point in stiff studio portraits, not snapshots at all, of ancestors to whom no narrative has been attached. A little halo of photographic illumination, in other words, accompanies us in our traversal of the decades, and any aesthetic or sociological values that the photographs possess are incidental. With a poignancy peculiar to photographic images, the past is captured while its obliteration is strongly implied. Susan Sontag wrote in the first of the brilliant essays collected in her book "On Photography" (1977):

> All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. . . . A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence.

Without a felt connection to one's own mortal course through a lifetime of circumstance, snapshots become baffling and boring, their "qualities and intentions," as Sontag says, "swallowed up in the generalized pathos of time past." The generalized pathos, however, needs less than a multitude of illustrations. Most amateur snapshots fall short of being either art or news. An album by a

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HOT SOUP COFFEE CHOCOLATE
PHOTO STUDIO
WHIRLEY BIRD NEWEST FLYING SENSATION
SEAT FOR TAKING PICTURES ONLY
GET CHANGE AT TICKET BOX
OVER 2 MIN. PLAYING TIME
Hey Big Boy come up & see me some time!

Snapshots, with a poignancy peculiar to photographic images, capture the past while strongly implying its obliteration.

professional art photographer, such as Richard Kalvar's recent "Earthlings" (Flammarion; $65), has us studying each page for the joke or trick or shock—the news—in each elegantly composed example, selected from sheaves of less happy exposures and reproduced large enough for every detail to tell. The prints in "The Art of the American Snapshot" are reproduced at their actual modest size, with lots of blazingly white space, and have taken their riddles into oblivion with their anonymous creators. Is the baby, for instance, lying on an open packed suitcase, apparently asleep, alive or dead? What impulse led someone, probably not the photographer, to scribble a ballpoint dress over a man in bathing trunks and pen the words "Hey Big Boy, come up & see me some time!"? What is the woman standing in a field and covering her face with her shapely hands while being photographed trying to tell us? Is she peeking at the photographer (and at us) through her fingers? Is she being coy or grief-stricken? The image is arresting enough to use on the book's dust jacket, but its peculiar agonized playfulness hangs enigmatically in the general pathos of lost time.

Such images may baffle interpretation, but they do not repel commentary. Four National Gallery curators write at some length on four periods of snapshot-taking: "Photographic Amusements, 1888-1919"; "Quick, Casual, Modern, 1920-1939"; "Fun Under the Shade of the Mushroom Cloud, 1940-1959"; and "When the Earth Was Square, 1960-1978." Diane Waggoner tackles the thirty-year era after George Eastman's promulgation of the first Kodak cameras: "They had a string mechanism to cock the shutter and a button to release it, and they made exposures at a shutter speed of 1/25 second." The significant novelty wasn't in the construction of the camera but in that of the film. Eastman had founded a company in Rochester to mass-produce gelatin dry-plate glass negatives, and after a few years he did away with the glass, inventing paper negatives that spooled onto a roll holder that fit into a standard plate camera. After a few more years, he launched a hand camera preloaded with paper negatives; he named

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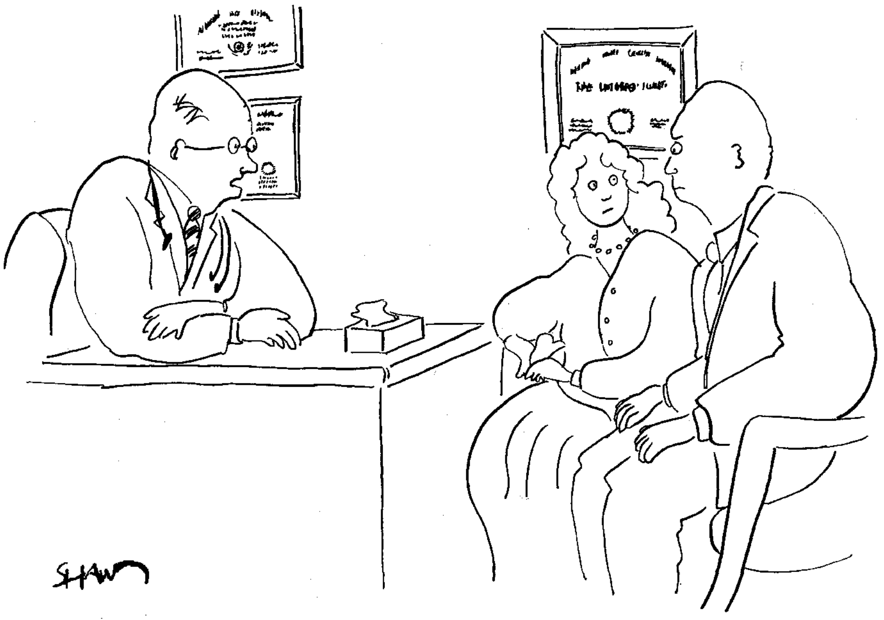
the camera Kodak, "coining the name because it was unique and could not be mispronounced." These early Kodaks produced round images, two and a half inches in diameter, which were developed and printed in the Rochester factory; the customer sent in the entire camera, which was returned to him, loaded with new film, along with the prints from the old, all for the not inconsiderable fee of ten dollars. "You press the button, we do the rest" was the captivating slogan.

The Eastman Kodak Company proved as prolific of slogans as of technical innovations. Within a year, the complicated transfer of emulsion to a glass plate and then to a thin, flexible gelatin support had been simplified to a one-step negative on transparent film of cellulose nitrate. Within two years, a folding camera had been introduced, with a viewfinder, characterized in its early state as a "dimly lit one-inch square." Refinement followed refinement, and slogan followed slogan: "Kodak as you go"; "A vacation without a Kodak is a vacation wasted." By 1900, when the first Brownie was marketed for one dollar, with rolls of film at fifteen cents apiece, America was hooked. More than a hundred and fifty thousand Brownies were sold in the first year.

The early users were a methodical, tricksome lot; they compiled careful albums and took elaborately posed pictures, with mirrors, intentional double exposures, and trompe-l'oeil feats of perspectival foolery. The spiritualism and stage theatricality of the time were echoed in tableaux vivants, eerie masks, ghostly illusions, and fancy costumes, including some jaunty cross-dressing. Summer vacations and snowstorms were snapped up as especially worth preserving. A steadying tripod and judicious use of magnesium-based flash powder enabled indoor shots. The shutter speed was still slow enough to blur action, though by 1909 Kodak had introduced Speed Kodak film, with exposure times as fast as a thousandth of a second. America was speeding up; Waggoner writes, "When middle-class America increasingly enjoyed time at play and time on the go, the camera went along for the ride—quite literally, as cameras designed to hang on the bicycle were sold for convenience of travel." The camera and the bicycle both generated, in this clubbable era, organizations for their group enjoyment, as did the automobile in the early decades of the twentieth century. When soldiers went off to the First World War, Eastman ads offered this advice to loved ones: "The parting gift, a Kodak. Wherever he goes the world over, he will find Kodak film to fit his Kodak." Even in the trenches, over there.

In 1922, Sarah Kennel tells us in treating the years 1920-39, the poet Vachel Lindsay wrote that "the acres of photographs in the Sunday newspapers



"You have irritable-spouse syndrome."

make us into a hieroglyphic civilization far nearer to Egypt than to England." Though increasingly commonplace and versatile—"quick, casual, modern"—the camera still found employment as a faddish toy; the booklet "Picture Taking at Night" instructed readers how to create silhouettes with backlit models. Trickery with shadows and with perspective figures in a number of the shots that have made their way into "The Art of the American Snapshot." Stop-action dives and acrobatics take us back to a more muscular, outdoorsy America; there are two discreetly non-frontal views of skinny-dippers. A number of somewhat racy exposures hint at the camera's significant role as a de-inhibitor, an enabler of what Kennel calls "home-grown pornography." Nudes in provocative poses were among the earliest fruits of big-box, slow-tech photography in the mid-nineteenth century; something about the camera's impassive appropriation of whatever is set before it invites, like a psychoanalyst's silence, self-exposure. Another new work on photographic folk art, Näkki Goranin's "American Photobooth" (to be published early next year, by Norton), relates how, beginning in the nineteen-fifties:

> Complaints started coming in, from Woolworth's and other stores, that people, particularly women, were stripping off their clothes for the private photobooth camera. Couples started being a little more adventurous in the privacy of the curtained booth. As a result, many of the Woolworth's stores had to remove their curtains to discourage naughty encounters.

It is good times, happy times, that we wish to preserve. In its ads of the twenties and thirties, Kodak insistently pushed its product as the recorder of family life. "I'll show 'em a *real* family!" one jubilant snapshooter brags ("He's something to brag about, that new baby of yours"); another spread shows two commuters on a railroad platform, one of them enviously studying the other's snapshots and thinking, "I felt ashamed. *He* was so proud of *his* children; why hadn't I taken snapshots of *mine*?" A third ad simply advises, while a proficient mother photographs her two children in their lunch booth, "Let Kodak keep the story." The camera both exalted and invaded domestic privacy—"Candid photography is making us human goldfish," one pundit wrote in the journal *Photography* in 1938. Letting Kodak keep the story constituted one more formerly human operation delegated to machines; our anniversaries and children's birthdays were remembered for us, in caches of snapshots. A vacation became a string of photo ops, a mechanical escape from what one writer, in 1928, called "the circumscribed routine of factory, store, or office." At many a wedding, the hired photographer replaced the minister as the central officiator.

Sarah Greenough deals with the years 1940-59, under the rather frantic head "Fun Under the Shade of the Mushroom Cloud." By 1940, flashbulbs, the color film Kodachrome and Agfacolor-Neu, and the superb Leica camera, using 35-mm. film, had been invented. Increasingly cheap and handy color film followed. In 1948, the Polaroid Corporation offered the Land Camera, which made black-and-white prints in sixty seconds, thus cutting out the local developer and making snapshot-taking more private than ever. But perhaps these innovations, and ever more automatic features relieving the photographer of control over focus and exposure time, made amateur photography too easy, for there is a discernible falling-off of artistic energy in the postwar snapshots exhibited. Except for a joyous nude of a fat girl with her eyes shut in an ecstasy of embarrassment, and a stunning pair of tan legs that are, Greenough tells us, a man's, and a scrawny Arbusian Christmas tree in a corner, and some few others, the photos tend to look like television—fuzzy slices of life, cut with a dull knife. This section is the only one that presents a named photographer, a young Midwestern woman identified as Flo; she lived at a Milwaukee Y.W.C.A. and snapped shots of the other young women living there, none of whom, from the evidence, wanted to be photographed. Greenough tells us, as we can see, "They covered their faces with their hands or magazines; they turned and walked away or closed their doors in her face; they stuck their tongues out at her unwelcome intrusions." Flo's photographs, of which thirty-two, usually flash-lit, examples are included in the catalogue, rarely peek outdoors; their invariably female subjects, caught doing dishes or

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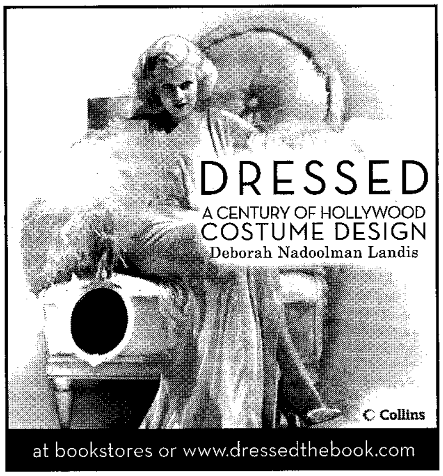
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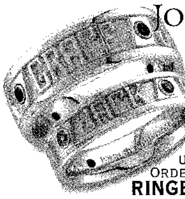
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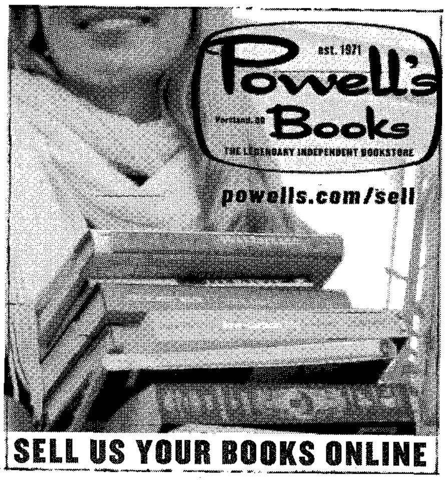
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washing their hair, seem to nervously inhabit a flimsy bomb shelter. Greenough gamely theorizes:

> From our own experiences, we instinctively know when viewing snapshots like these that they, unlike many carefully crafted works of art or fully articulated documents, possess a kind of truth that is both profound and unassailable. But what that truth is precisely remains forever unknown.

Fifties existentialism, which also gave us the deadpan facticity of the *nouveau roman* and, in cinema, the *nouvelle vague*, gives us the dogged dreariness of Flo's unknown, though profound and unassailable, truth. The camera has acquired a will of its own, blindly recording unwilling subjects like a robotized vacuum cleaner nosing into every corner of the room.

Matthew S. Witkovsky, taking up the years 1960-78, heaves the most ornate critical language into the bottomless pit of the ordinary. He claims that the square shape favored by Brownies and Polaroids "supplants narrative flow with iconic stasis, and it tends to draw attention away from the picture toward the object as such." He mischievously proposes that "making one's own pictures in these years might be said for the first time to match in its breadth and banality the daily experience of seeing pictures by others." Public and private achieve a null parity. Photographs of children, common in every era, "reveal a perhaps unaccustomed level of nonchalance that separates them from earlier family snapshots and potentially from those made more recently as well"; several show children in perilous situations and suggest "a remarkable, even disconcerting privileging of humor over safety." The week's funniest, most brutal videos are around the corner. Over all, Witkovsky decrees, "many of these pictures seem insistently mundane and emotionally awkward"; the vulgar or obscene gestures in a number of them "might be interpreted as a sign of increasing social recklessness, part of 'sixties culture,' its echoes and aftermath." American mores and manners, in short, are going to pot, and Kodak is there to keep the story. Art photography, once distinctly aloof, with its sharp-focus nudes, mountains, and still-lifes, from amateur snapshooting, now "takes a turn toward unremediated—and therefore highly provocative—banality" in the work of "avant-garde artists such as Acconci, John Baldessari, and Dan Graham, all of whom use photography (or so they claim) as a mute and inexpressive tool." Garry Winogrand photographed with a random lavishness that left thousands of undeveloped rolls at his death, "a snapshooter run amok." The determination "to drain formal interest, to de-skill the creative process, generates an aesthetic that many at the time called 'neutral' or 'affectless' but which seems more accurately described as somewhere between kitsch and tedium." Where Kodak set up shop to glorify the American family, a modern master like Diane Arbus makes it appear appalling.

The photographic impulse, as I experienced it in my days as a Nikon-toting daddy, wore two aspects, the creative and the commemorative. The first sought to catch, in the plump snap of the shutter, something vivid and even beautiful in its color and contour; the second aim, more realistic though in a sense grander, was to halt the flow of time. The camera, that highly evolved mechanism, put into Everyman's untrained hands the chance to become, if half by accident, a death-defying artist. The collector Robert Jackson deserves the last shot; his afterword to the catalogue manages to cast a pall of reasonableness over his curious passion. He coins the phrase "a visual trophy" for a medium that "seeks to preserve an idealized and individualized moment in time." Attempting to explain the collector's motives, he claims, "It is the anonymous snapshot's immediacy, inherent honesty, and unstudied freedom from external influence that are the draw. . . . The personal can therefore become impersonal." Ah, but, then again, "a collector can have a subjective interest in a snapshot's narrative content as a surrogate for life experiences. Thus the personal remains personal, if you will." Like novels and scandal sheets, snapshots are windows, however smeary, into other lives. Jackson goes on to name, in four broad columns of print, a hundred and eight dealers, fellow-collectors, and flea-market merchandisers who assisted his macabre traffic in silver-based shadows. For those who care, he confides that a leading bazaar for these souvenirs of the pre-digital age is eBay. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

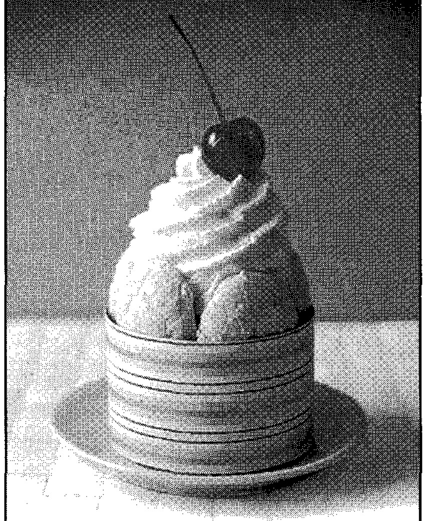
Short Stories

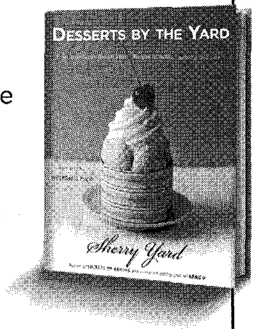
The Complete Stories, *by David Malouf (Pantheon; $27.50).* Malouf often sets the brutality of his native Australia against its exquisite natural beauty, and in these stories violence stalks his characters from the mangrove swamps of the Gulf country—"sheet after sheet of brimming water, all lit with sky and alive, like a page of Genesis"—to the beaches of Sydney. A rejected youth shoots himself during a hunting trip; a fire destroys a patriarch's family heirlooms; a prowler terrorizes a suburban neighborhood. And yet Malouf is far less interested in the events themselves than he is in the physical sensations and psychological associations that give them meaning. That is why, when an elderly tourist wanders into the desert to die in the shadow of Ayers Rock, we understand her actions in a way that her middle-aged son never will. Peeling back the skin of appearances, Malouf reveals another, far more dramatic landscape: sometimes terrifying, fantastical in its contradictions, but also profoundly familiar and stirring.

Like You'd Understand Anyway, *by Jim Shepard (Knopf; $23).* Many of these exquisite, multifaceted tales take outlandish historical occurrences—a father and son who rode out the largest tidal wave in recorded history in a fishing vessel; nineteenth-century explorers who lugged a whaleboat through a desert in search of a "vast inland sea"—and make them into stories about familial or marital tensions. Thus, the head executioner in revolutionary France watches his marriage unravel after his youngest son falls to his death from the guillotine, a Soviet engineer contemplates his personal and public failures when the Chernobyl meltdown claims his brother, a sickly Roman scribe reckons with his bellicose centurion father. It is a testament to Shepard's power that the reader needs to know nothing about Aeschylus to be moved by a fictional account of his sibling's death.

Why the Devil Chose New England for His Work, *by Jason Brown (Open City; $14).* The narrators of Brown's second book of stories are mostly watchers—witnesses to sordid events in the fictional town of Vaughn, Maine. Through their eyes, the familiar routines of small-town life are transmogrified into emblematic ugliness. Some of the stories deal with Maine's twin preoccupations with boats and lumber, but the strongest anatomize the town with stunning emotional precision. In the title story, the Old Vaughn Day parade seems like a bacchanalia to a young boy who sees his father drunk and in costume as a drunken Zulu warrior—Brown's point being less the rottenness of the provinces than the fevered nature of adolescence.

Vanilla Bright Like Eminem, *by Michel Faber (Harcourt; $23).* Faber, the author of the vast novel "The Crimson Petal and the White," made his name with a prize-winning volume of short stories. In the current collection, he mines the mundane for the unexpected, even the surreal, with impressive assurance. Occasionally, his facility gives an impression of superficiality, but at his best he explores conflicts with a compelling balance of menace and wit, an ability exemplified by a story about an ailing dictator who must rely on a surgeon he has banished to a labor camp. Faber's main concern is with states of dissociation and entrapment. In another story, a saleswoman persuades a depressed single mother in a bad neighborhood to replace a window with a video screen that features a nicer view, broadcast live from an old priory garden. The mother willingly buys an illusion—a vision of freedom that also seals her from the outside world.





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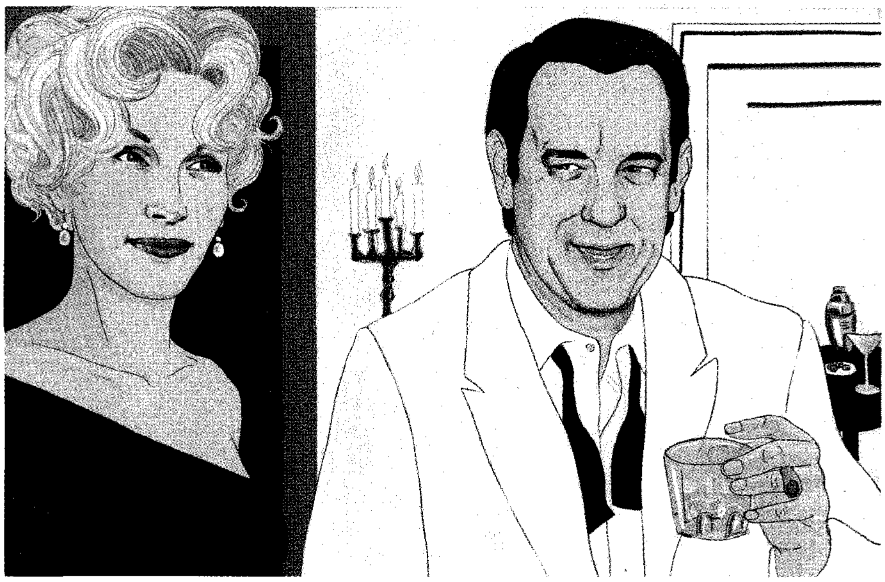
THE CURRENT CINEMA

SETTLING SCORES

"Charlie Wilson's War," "Sweeney Todd," and "Persepolis."

BY ANTHONY LANE



Julia Roberts and Tom Hanks in Mike Nichols's new movie.

LARA TOMLIN

The new Mike Nichols film, "Charlie Wilson's War," is ninety-seven minutes long. Into that time, it packs political machination, helicopter gunships, single-malt whiskey, Las Vegas, Islamabad, naked butts, and eight years of war. The film, adapted from George Crile's book, doesn't always work, but it sure offers value for money. One reason for this economy is that Nichols has paired up for the first time with Aaron Sorkin, late of "The West Wing," whose scripts operate on the principle that there is no affair of state, however tangled or burdensome, that cannot be breezed through at a brisk dramatic pace. That breeze is enviable (you feel it in an idealist like Capra, as well as in a cynic like Preston Sturges), but it comes with a risk: watch too much TV, relish the ease and aplomb of a movie like "Charlie Wilson's War," and you may start to wish—even to believe—that all government can be run this way, with so little friction and such style.

Charles Wilson was, until 1996, a Democratic congressman for the Second Congressional District in Texas. Nichols's film gets going in 1980, when this upstanding representative of the people found himself in hot water. Up to his neck in it, to be exact, with a *Playboy* cover girl and a couple of friendly strippers sharing the soak. This, we understand, was a standard night out for Wilson (Tom Hanks), whose tireless, nonpartisan research into the bottle and the boudoir stood him in good stead for the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee on which he sat. Early in the film, we see him swivel around in his hot tub to catch a Dan Rather report on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It's a neat image—too neat, perhaps, verging on the flip—for the two tones of Wilson's personality, presented by Nichols and Sorkin as a sly response to our current political leadership. Instead of blameless puritans who drop the ball when required to act, we find, in Wilson, the reckless gadabout who gets things done. That's the idea, at any rate. What Nichols has made is not a romantic comedy set in the political world; it's a vision—hopelessly unrealistic, but lit with hopeful fun—of politics itself as a game of comic romance.

Wilson is approached by Joanne Herring (Julia Roberts), a pro-Pakistani Texan hostess (how many of *those* do you know?), with millions to burn. "I'm a liberal," he tells her. "Not where it counts," she replies. An unusual combination of bombshell and firebrand, she seduces Charlie—never an arduous task—into visiting the refugee camps on the Pakistan border, to which the embattled Afghans have fled. He has already ramped up the American contribution to the Afghan cause from five million dollars to a princely ten. By the end of the movie, it has risen to a billion. From here on, Wilson is a sinner with a cause and a sidekick: a bullish C.I.A. agent by the name of Gust Avrakotos (Philip Seymour Hoffman), with a dipping gut, a pair of smoked spectacles, and a mustache that you could trim only with a weed whacker. The two of them get along famously: "You're an awfully easy man to like, Congressman," Avrakotos says over the phone.

Nichols has a problem here, in that, ever since Hoffman slid over the hood of a car in "The Talented Mr. Ripley," he has developed a habit of bursting into well-behaved movies and taking them hostage. That's not to call him a grandstander; he isn't like Anthony Quinn, say, munching the scenery and bellowing other actors off the soundstage. Hoffman's first scene, in the new film, is a shouting match with his boss at the agency, except that he doesn't shout. The words just stream lethally out of him, in his clipped baritone, and within seconds we have our man—not that we will ever know him, for the guy is a spook, but we feel the indubitable brunt of his presence. He's just *there*, fully formed and utterly convincing, like a clerk or a cavalryman in a Russian novel, and, as he plants himself foursquare in Wilson's office, hands in pockets, you find yourself laughing at the solid rush of truth. Even a pro like Hanks, rooted in congeniality, is forced to raise his game.

That office scene is, by some distance, the most enjoyable thing in the picture. For one thing, it's a dovetail: Wilson is snared in a sex-and-drugs scandal, and he's trying to limit the damage with the help of his female assistants (whom he addresses en masse as "jailbait"), while simultaneously questioning Avrakotos about covert military aid. Doors open and shut, blondes rotate with redheads, and somehow, in the midst of the farce, plans are set in train that will eventually lead to the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan. If the notion of war being sparked by a character clash is purest Nichols, then war as war—as cruelty and privation—is another country, and, as he showed in "Catch-22," back in 1970, it leaves him cold and panicked. The glimpses of actual combat in "Charlie Wilson's War," with gun-turret shots of Afghan villages being strafed, are a joke: not black comedy but random stabs at an action movie, whipped along with upbeat music, from an intimist director who is far happier finding dirty laughs in a closed room. The title of Nichols's last film, "Closer," could stand for his whole career, and to watch a couple of charmers like Hanks and Julia Roberts play postcoital patty-cake with their schedules and schemes is a civilizing joy, even if the actual coitus is kind of hard to imagine. Make love, then war: it's a provoking combination, and few could have foretold what would finally emerge from Charlie Wilson's war, with its triumphant Afghan tribes and, among them, a battle-schooled bin Laden. "Let's see," Avrakotos says repeatedly. There is something in Hanks's quizzical face, in the movie's final frame, that hints at unintended troubles still to come.

What do we fear more, song or blood? History would propose the latter, whatever the claim advanced by the collected works of Meat Loaf. But that, it seems, is not the view at Warner Bros. The company has the delicate task of selling the new Tim Burton film, "Sweeney Todd," which is adapted from the stage musical by Stephen Sondheim. For all Burton's extravagant manner, the adaptation is faithful to the original, which means that the bulk of the movie is sung rather than spoken. Not that you would guess as much from the trailer; the one that I found online, and saw again at the theatre, contained no more than a single line of song. The rest of it was edited to suggest a wordy, overripe melodrama—to reassure the kids in the audience, perhaps, that there was nothing to be scared of. No croons or caroling, no arias of contempt or embarrassing exhalations of love: just good, old-fashioned, comforting gushes of gore.

Mr. Todd (Johnny Depp) was not always the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, slicing the gullets of his customers and tipping them into the cellar; once upon a time, he was Benjamin Barker, meek and mild, with a wife and a baby. These were stolen from him by the wolfish Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman), who has raised the child, Johanna (Jayne Wisener), as his ward and prisoner. Add the fact that Barker was shipped off to Australia on a false charge, and that he has now changed his name and returned to London bent on revenge, and you have a story that stirs together, to a near-ludicrous degree, the basics not just of the spicy Victorian shocker but of the classic fairy tale, with its unrepentant need to set things right. (In 1986, seven years after "Sweeney Todd," Sondheim presented the Grimm-seasoned "Into the Woods.") So, how do you rescue the hell brew from absurdity?

The answer, for Sondheim, is dexterity: the unstinting sophistication of his wordplay and his flirtatious harmonies—forever hinting at the sweeping show tune, only to duck away into discord and off-key fretfulness—is a riposte to his silly plot. With Tim Burton, the balance is not so easy. Like Mrs. Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter), the slatternly piemaker for whom Sweeney provides the human fillings ("Shepherd's pie peppered / With actual shepherd"), Burton likes to overcook things. The opening credits of his new movie pretty much rehash those of the last one, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" (2005), with blood instead of chocolate flowing through the machinery. They are certainly no more frightening; the scarlet ooze might as well be strawberry jam. The whole work drips with a camp savagery (hence the presence of Sacha Baron Cohen as Pirelli, a rival barber and faux-Italianate fop), which in turn relies on the conviction that death itself, like sexual desire, exists to be sniffed at and chuckled over. That is fine for a film like "Beetlejuice," but Sondheim is serious about the misanthropic malice of his hero, whereas Depp's Sweeney comes across as one more mournful Burton wacko. His singing gives off the Cockney yowl of someone who has listened to too much early Bowie, and his ivory-pale face is crowned by a stiff black mane with a white blaze in it. If you had sat Susan Sontag down and broken the news that not everyone

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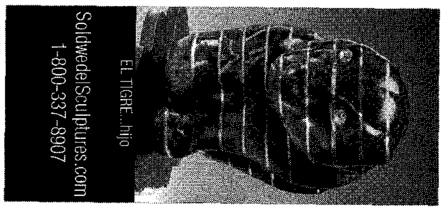
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in New York reads Hegel, you would have got the same effect.

The best reason to see "Sweeney Todd" is Toby (Edward Sanders), a boy from the workhouse who helps, in all innocence, to dish out the pies. Some of the gravest performances this year have come from children—Shélan O'Keefe as John Cusack's daughter in "Grace Is Gone," and Dillon Freasier as Daniel Day-Lewis's son in "There Will Be Blood"—and Sanders, like them, has the extraordinary gift of appearing to age, in sorrow as in knowledge, with the unfolding of the film. By the end, he has become a man: the last man standing, indeed, baptized in blood. Is that enough to redeem the tale from excess? For all the wild swipes of Sweeney's razor, spattering red on the lens, was there not more threat, and mystery, in the sight of Depp as Edward Scissorhands—the lost soul who could kill at will but never did?

The new animated movie "Persepolis" is France's entry for this year's Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It owes much to the noble, not to say nutty, French obsession with *bandes dessinées*, yet its theme—like its creator, Marjane Satrapi, who co-directed with Vincent Paronnaud, and who wrote the graphic novels from which it sprang—is Iranian. The story is an embellished memoir, tracing the childhood and youth of the heroine, also named Marjane, from the Shah's regime in Tehran to the 1979 revolution and beyond. Grand upheavals are viewed through her gaze, and sometimes through her veil. She is an odd compound of the malleable and the defiant, doomed to settle nowhere, and as quick to argue with God—a remote sage on a cloud—as she is with her kindly grandmother. Marjane's own deity of choice is Bruce Lee (courtesy of her cosmopolitan parents, who do little to curb her tastes), and there is a lovely sequence in which seedy loiterers offer her bootlegs of Michael Jackson and Iron Maiden, as if Western bands were drugs. Yet the addiction cools; when, as a teen-ager, Marjane is sent to Vienna to continue her schooling in safety, she shrinks from the bourgeoisie as if they were the secret police.

The film is largely in black-and-white, yet the result, far from seeming gloomy, has the pertness and the simplicity of a cutout. I found it, if anything, too simple. The faces are no more than tapered ovals, which makes some of the characters hard to distinguish, and I was left with the nagging, if ungallant, impression that I had been flipping through a wipe-clean board book entitled "Miffy and Friends Play with Islamic Fundamentalism." There is no denying the boldness of "Persepolis," both in design and in moral complaint, but there must surely be moments, in Marjane's life as in ours, that cry out for cross-hatching and the grown-up grayness of doubt. ♦

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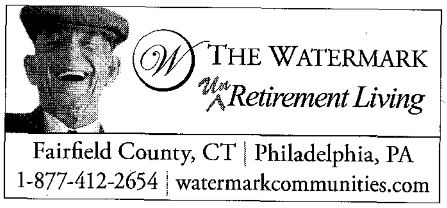

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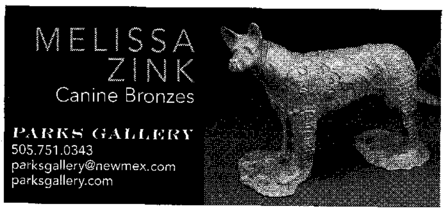

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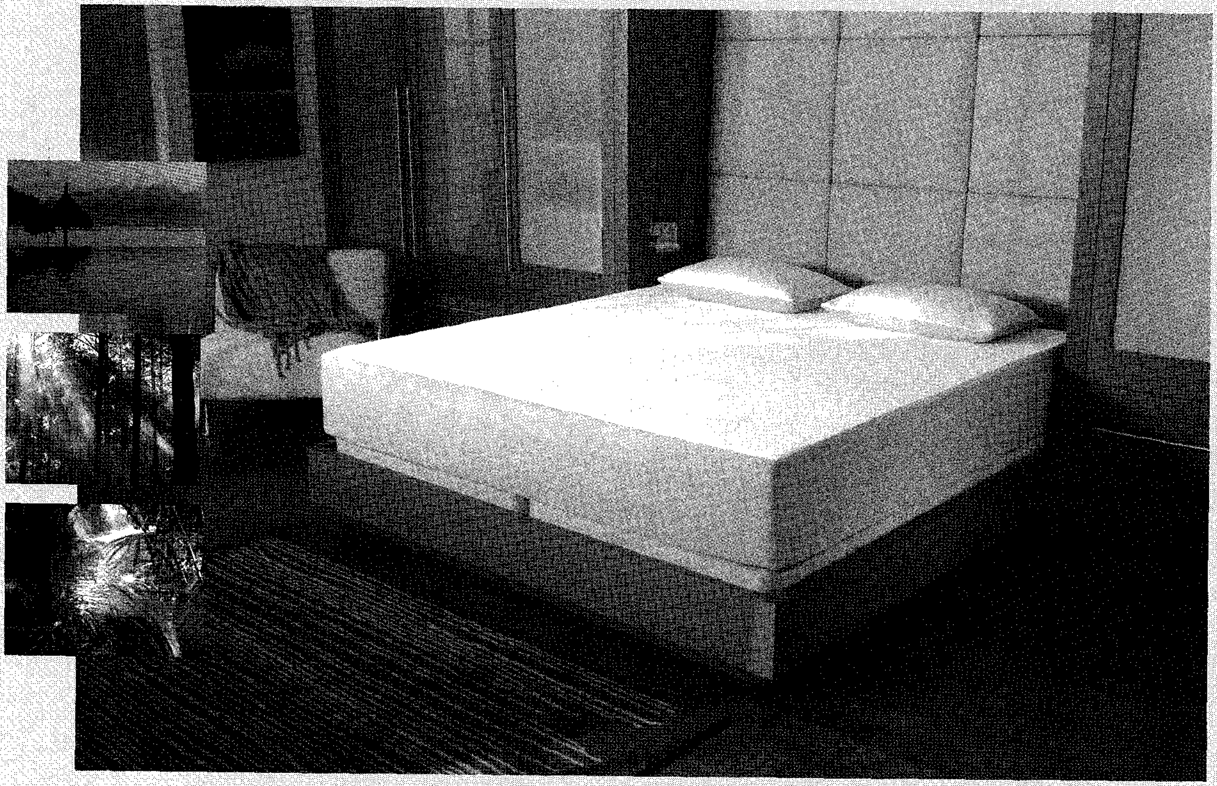

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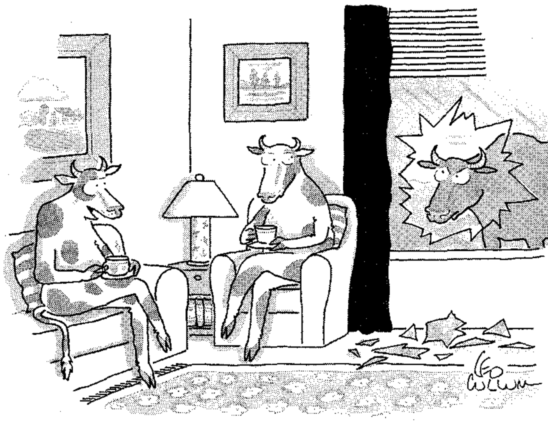
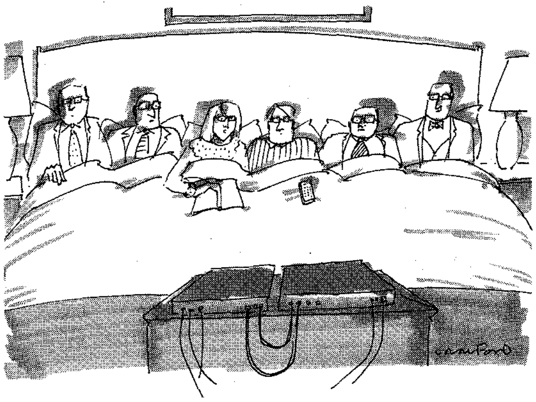
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, December 30th. Finalists in the December 10th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 14th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"You should be happy. How many husbands even notice window treatments?"
Lawrence Wood, Chicago, Ill.



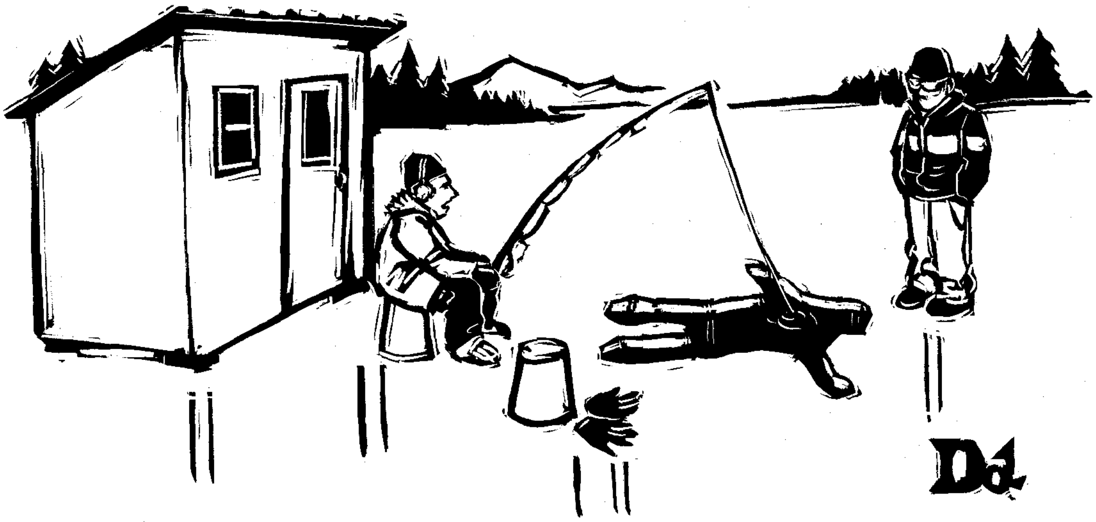
THE FINALISTS

"I liked it better when we just had your people call my people."
John Late, Satellite Beach, Fla.

"So this is what it's like to be a Nielsen family."
Richard LeBlanc, Dallas, Texas

"Next week I pick the fantasy."
Peter Bruland, New York City

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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